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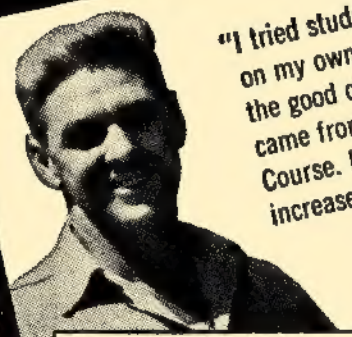

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No. 1
December
1955

# crime ILLUSTRATED

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"CRIME Illustrated" is the second of a new series of magazines to present a novel and revolutionary development in the art of story-telling. We at E. C. call this new form of adult entertainment "Picto-Fiction." *Picto-Fiction* is a careful combination of two arts: the art of writing, and the art of illustration.

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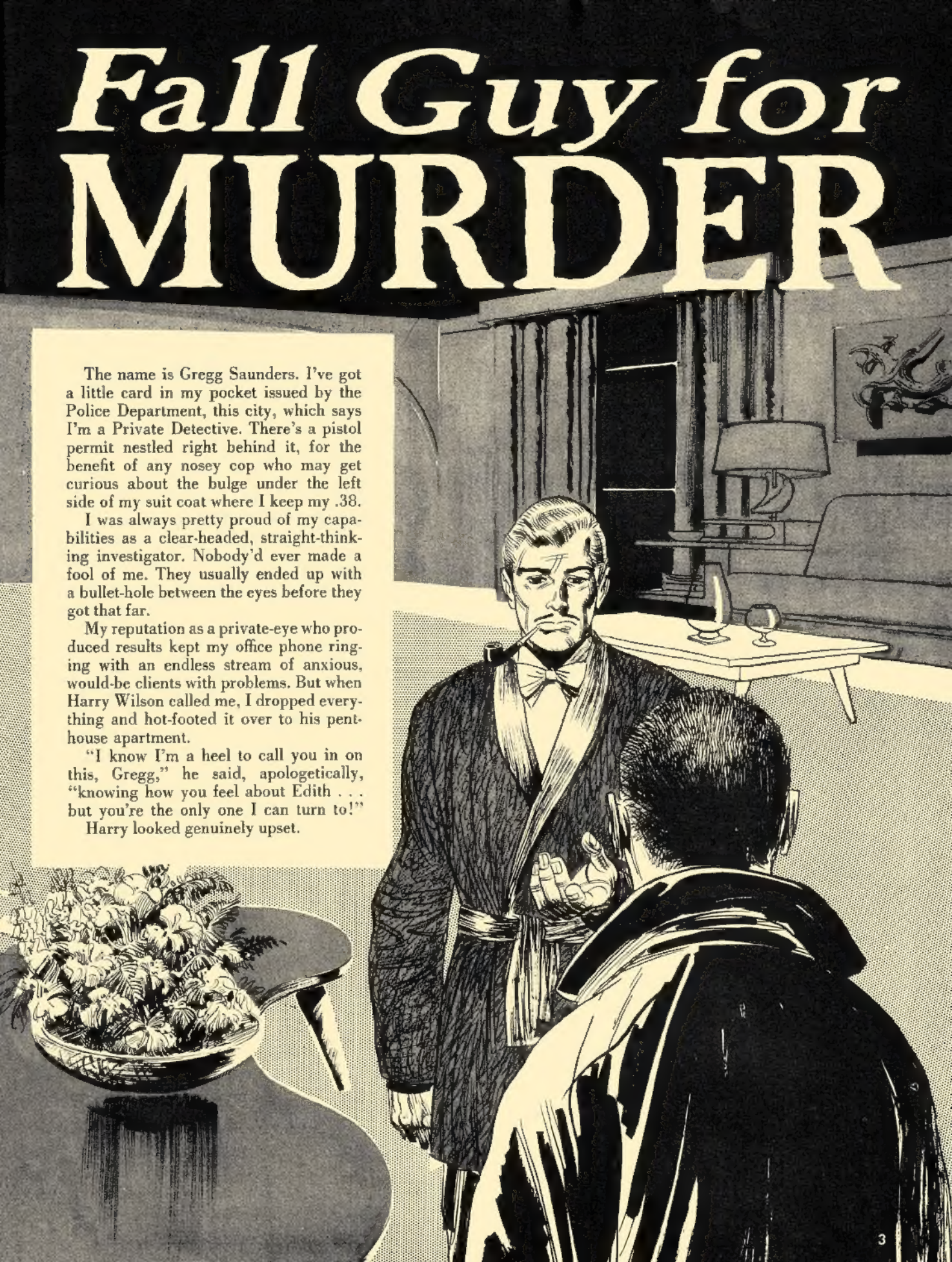
# Fall Guy for MURDER



The name is Gregg Saunders. I've got a little card in my pocket issued by the Police Department, this city, which says I'm a Private Detective. There's a pistol permit nestled right behind it, for the benefit of any nosey cop who may get curious about the bulge under the left side of my suit coat where I keep my .38.

I was always pretty proud of my capabilities as a clear-headed, straight-thinking investigator. Nobody'd ever made a fool of me. They usually ended up with a bullet-hole between the eyes before they got that far.

My reputation as a private-eye who produced results kept my office phone ringing with an endless stream of anxious, would-be clients with problems. But when Harry Wilson called me, I dropped everything and hot-footed it over to his penthouse apartment.

"I know I'm a heel to call you in on this, Gregg," he said, apologetically, "knowing how you feel about Edith . . . but you're the only one I can turn to!"

Harry looked genuinely upset.

"Forget it, Harry. The best man got the girl, that's all. It's an old, old story," I smiled.

Two years before, Harry Wilson had married the girl I'd been engaged to . . . Edith Colby. I'd been crazy about Edith, but it had been just one of those things . . . the usual routine. She'd fallen for Harry, given me back my ring, and we'd parted the best of friends. Did I say I'd *been* crazy about Edith? I still was. I'd carried the torch for her all this time. Everybody knew it, including Harry.

"Tell me what's happened," I went on.

"Edith has left me, Gregg." Harry looked like he was ready to cry. "She's packed up and vanished. No note . . . no word . . . nothing!"

"What?" I tried to hide my delight. "I . . . I'm sorry to hear that, Harry. I thought you two were getting on so *well*."

"That's just it, Gregg. We were getting on . . . *very* well. I . . . I can't *understand* it!" he shrugged.

I'd never liked Harry Wilson. I'd only remained cordial to him in order to see Edith now and then. This bust-up came as a complete surprise to me.

"Three nights ago," Harry composed himself and went on, "I came home from the office and found all of her things gone. I . . . I didn't know what to do. C'mon," he motioned to the bedroom. "I'll show you."

"Lead the way," I nodded.

I followed Harry across the luxuriously-furnished living room into a bedroom bigger than my whole three-room dump downtown. I watched him slide back a large mirrored wardrobe door, point to the bare racks, the empty shelves.

"See? All her clothes, her suitcases, shoes, hats, everything. Gone!"

"It certainly looks like she meant business," I mused, studying the stripped closet.

He moved around the room like he was lost in it, stumbling to dresser-drawers, flinging them open, showing me their yawning emptiness.

"Lingerie . . . hose . . . everything. Gone!"

"I see," I said, for lack of anything else.

I sat down on the bed. Edith's bed. And I looked at Harry. Guys like Harry Wilson kill me. They sit up in their nice plush offices and push buttons and pull down their forty grand a year, and they think they're smarter than the whole world.

"All right, Harry," I said. "So Edith left you. Why call me in?"

Harry looked at me with pleading eyes.

"Because I want you to find her for me, Gregg."

I flipped a butt up from my pack of Kools and picked it out with my lips. I snapped open my Zippo and stared at the dancing flame.

"Why not call in the cops, Harry? They've got a department that handles this sort of thing . . ."

"You know," I said, deliberately. "The Bureau of Missing Persons . . ."

I watched his lips twitch, his face pale.

"I . . . I can't, Gregg. You know that! I . . . I couldn't stand the publicity. It would ruin me in my profession!" He was almost scared.

I nodded and stood up. I peered into the empty dresser drawers, nosed around the bare closet. Then I turned to Harry.

"This isn't my kind of case, Harry . . . but,. . . since it's for *both* of you . . . you *and* Edith, I'll see what I can do!"

Harry seemed relieved. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a checkbook.

"Good! I'll make out a check as a retainer. How much . . . ?"

"No thanks, Harry." I held up my hand. "This is on me . . . for old time's sake."

"But I insist upon paying you, Gregg. It's the least I can do!" Harry fumbled.

I had to control myself to keep from swinging out and slamming his grinning teeth back down his throat. Lord, what kind of a sap did he take me for? Did he really think he was putting something over on me?

"I said, 'no fee', Harry! Let's just call this a labor of love." I smiled at him coldly.

"I understand, Gregg," he said, patronizingly.

I took one last look around the stripped bedroom and walked out. I took my hat from the chair.

"I'll keep in touch with you, Harry," I said, opening the door.

"I . . . I don't know how to thank you for this, Gregg," he stammered.

I went down in the elevator, cursing to myself.

I'd get Harry for this! I'd get him if it was the last thing I ever did! Harry wasn't kidding me! The dirty — — — — ! He'd *murdered* Edith, and I was going to prove it!

Edith had always said Harry was clever. One had to be clever to become a successful stockbroker. One had to have imagination, too. Well, it was the same in my racket. And, to me, Harry hadn't been so clever after all!

Women who leave their husbands don't pack up every blasted thing they own! There's bound to be old house dresses, out-of-style skirts, worn-out shoes, stockings with runs . . . lots of things a woman would leave behind if she were running away.

Yes, Harry hadn't been so clever after all. He'd cleaned out Edith's closets and drawers *completely*. He'd stripped them bare . . . of everything. It wasn't natural. It stunk. It stunk to high heaven!

The elevator doors parted. I stood there, lost in thought.

"I'll see you burn for this, Harry Wilson," I whispered.

The elevator boy looked at me like I was nuts.

It was going to be tough proving my theory. Very tough! I couldn't let Harry know I was wise to him. I'd have to keep him thinking I'd fallen for his phony story. I crossed the lobby to the street and hailed a cab.

"Where to, Mister?" the cabby said as I piled in.

"City Morgue . . ."

All the way downtown, I kept trying to figure Harry's angle. Where did I fit in? Why did he pull me into his scheme? Was I to be his dupe...his alibi?

The taxi stopped and I got out, paid off the driver with a fin, and ducked into the morgue without waiting for my change.

"Well . . . if it isn't the shamus himself?"

Phil Kramer, the Morgue Director, was an old friend. I'd done him a big favor once.

"What's new, Gregg?" he smiled.

"I'm working on a case, Phil. Any unidentified D.O.A.'s come in the last two days?"

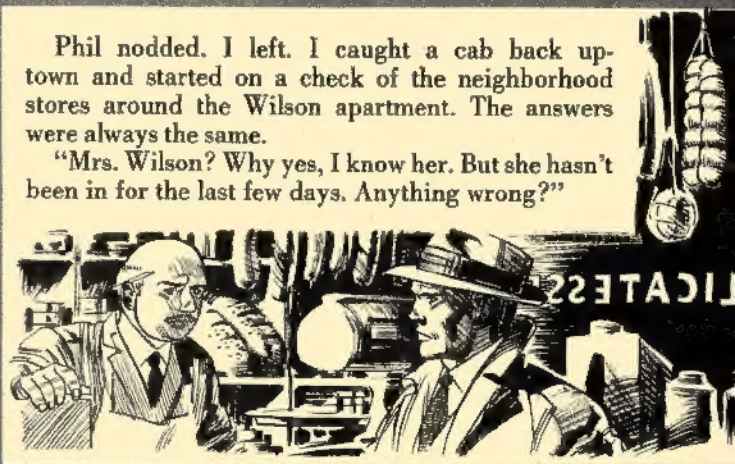
Phil shook his head.

"Not a one, Gregg. Working on a murder case?"

I shrugged. "I don't know for sure, Phil. I think so. Give me a ring if a female stiff shows up, will you . . . about twenty-eight, blonde, with blue eyes."

Phil nodded. I left. I caught a cab back uptown and started on a check of the neighborhood stores around the Wilson apartment. The answers were always the same.

"Mrs. Wilson? Why yes, I know her. But she hasn't been in for the last few days. Anything wrong?"



My last stop was a drug store. I cornered the pharmacist and flashed him my P.I. card.

"Tell me what you can about Harry Wilson," I tried a different tack. "Has he purchased any poison lately . . . any lethal drugs?"

"Why, no," the Rx-mixer scratched his head. "Funny you should ask, though." He pointed to a line of stacked shelves crammed with gaudy-jacketed books. A lending library. "Mr. Wilson *has* become quite a *mystery* fan in the last few months!"

"Really?" I tried not to show my eagerness at learning this bit of info. "You mean he's been reading murder mysteries lately? More than he used to?"

"Never even touched 'em till about four months ago," said the pharmacist. "Then, he started reading them like crazy. Always the same kind too. Murder mysteries about men who killed their wives. I remember him specifically asking for those kind. You know," he laughed dryly, "I'm kind of an amateur psychiatrist. I figure you can tell an awful lot about people from the kind of books and magazines they read. Now you take Mrs. Foley. She used to come in here and take out all the . . ."

I wasn't in the mood to hear about Mrs. Foley, so I cut him short. "Do you have a record of the books Mr. Wilson borrowed?"

The drug store owner pouted a little, but he brought out a small index-card box and shuffled through them.

"Yes, sir," he smiled, pulling up a card. "Here's the record right here. Starts back in May with 'The Blood-Red-Headed Blonde.' Now that was a pretty good yarn, if I remember correctly. This feller . . ."

I cut him short again, reaching for the card. "Thanks. Mind if I look this over?"

I studied the card. It was incredible. Harry'd taken out two and three books at a time, and he'd returned them in the next day or two. Then, he'd taken out more. He was either a fast reader, or . . .

"Oh, I almost forgot. See that last entry?" the pharmacist was talking again. "He *lost* that book!"

Of course! That was it. Harry was looking for something. Something specific. Something that would give him an idea on how to go about killing Edith!

"You say he lost this last book?" I asked.

"That's right."

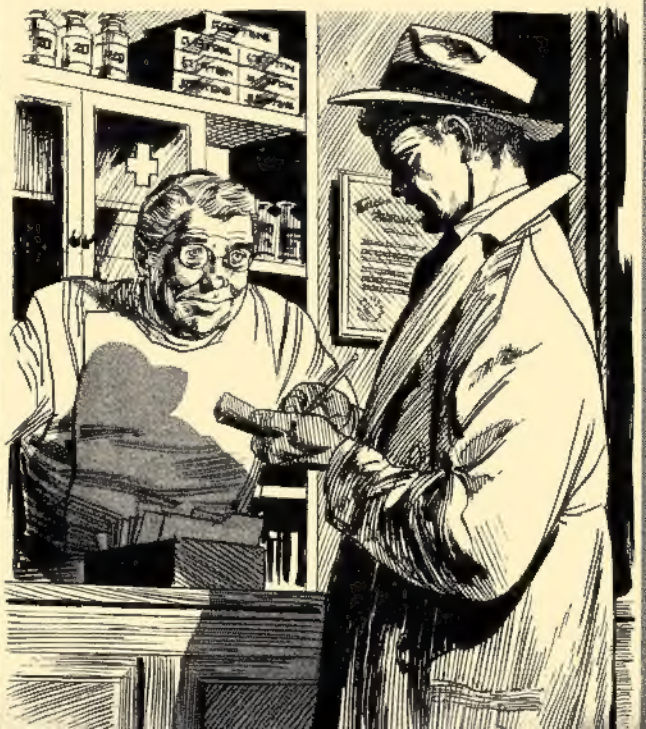
So Harry Wilson was supposed to be clever. So Harry Wilson was supposed to have an imagination. Well, he wasn't clever enough to plan a murder. He'd had to get it out of a book.

"Made him pay $2.50 for it . . . less depreciation," said the pharmacist.

"Come to think of it," he added, "he never borrowed another book after that. Guess he was sore."

"Or he *got* what he *wanted*," I muttered. I took out my notebook and wrote down the name of the book:

"FALL GUY FOR MURDER"...



"Do you have this book *in* at the present time?" I asked the drug store owner.

"Nope," he shook his head. "Couldn't replace it. The book was out of print."

I thanked him and left. That was the answer. All I had to do now was to get hold of the book Harry'd "lost" and read it. I caught a cab back downtown to the public library.

"Sorry," the girl at the desk shrugged.

" 'Fall Guy For Murder' was never included in our mystery collection. If we were to shelve *every* whodunnit ever written, we'd have to have a building..."

"Okay, sister," I turned. "Thanks anyway."

I tried two book stores and a used-book shop with no luck. The publisher's name wasn't listed in the telephone directory. *Just my luck*, I thought. *Probably out of business*. Finally, I decided there was only one way to get to read that book. I dialed Harry's number.

"Hello, Harry? This is Gregg . . ."

I tried to sound sincere. "Meet me at my office in twenty minutes, will you, Harry? If I'm not there, wait! I've got some news about Edith."

I hung up and taxied back uptown and waited across the street till Harry came out.

With Harry decoyed to my office, I would be free to search the plush apartment for the "lost" book. I waited until he hailed a cab and drove off, and then crossed over, took the elevator up, and let myself in with one of my trusty master-keys.

I made straight for the bookcase on the living room wall. It was sitting there, big as life. "Fall Guy For Murder." I reached up and took it down. It was still in its garrish paper jacket . . . the usual mystery type . . . showing a scanty-clad dame sprawled on the floor and a smoking gun held in a grimy fist sticking into the picture from one corner.

I sat down in an overstuffed chair, and opened the book. The drug store's lending library stamp was still on the inside front cover.

There were whole passages marked off in pencil. I had the answer . . . right there in my hands . . . how he'd murdered Edith . . . what he'd done with her body.

So, Harry was supposed to be clever. I laughed to myself. Harry'd been dumb! Really dumb! Didn't he know that all mystery books have a solution? All I had to do was read "Fall Guy For Murder" till I found out where the *murderer* tripped up, and Harry'd be trapped the *same way!*

I started scanning. The first paragraph nearly knocked me out of my seat. The book was written in the first person, by a private-eye!

It was an ironic coincidence. And the more I read, the more ironic the coincidence became. It was insane. The situation was exactly the same!

In the book, the private-eye is called in by the husband of his old flame. It seems she's disappeared . . . gone without leaving a word.

And the husband in the book has made the same mistake Harry'd made. He's cleaned out the closets and drawers too thoroughly. The private-eye notices this . . . *just as I had done!*

I shook my head. Then Harry *knew* it was a stupid blunder! He knew from the *book* I'd catch on. Why had he done it?

I read on . . .

The private-eye suspects murder. He starts checking. At a corner drug store, he learns that the husband had started reading 'who-dunnits' four months before. He gets the idea that the husband was looking for help . . . used a book to plan his wife's murder.

I felt a chill run up my back. It was crazy! Harry and I *both!* We'd followed this book to the letter!

I read on . . .

The private-eye checks the drug store owner's records . . . and, by God, if the husband hadn't lost the last book he'd borrowed too!

My head was whirling as I sat there in Harry's silent apartment, reading. Harry *knew* all this, then! He *knew* I'd find out about his borrowing books, losing one! Why had he *done* it? What had been his game?

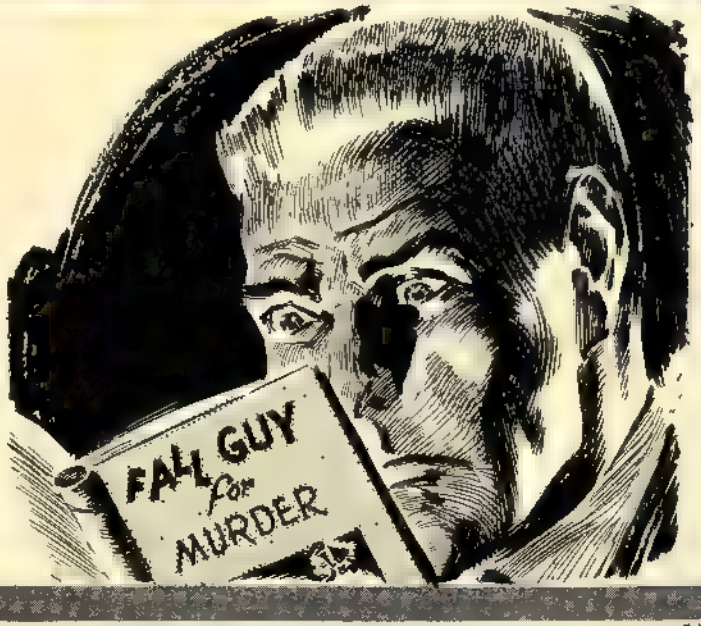
I loosened my tightening collar and read on . . .

The private-eye in the book goes to the husband's apartment, lets himself in with his master key.

I looked around, uncomfortably. Things were getting too close to home. Too parallel. If Harry knew, from reading "Fall Guy For Murder" that I'd come to this apartment searching for the book he'd "lost," what was he planning?

There was only one way for me to find out. I had to read on . . .

In the book, the private-eye finds the book the husband conveniently "lost." He sits down to read it. *Just as I was doing now!*



Was this to be one of those crazy story-loop chains, like two mirrors facing each other, reflecting back and forth, back and forth, on into infinity? A story in a story in a story, and so on?

I kept reading . . .

In the book, the private-eye keeps reading.

Suddenly, there is a sound behind him . . .

He turns, his blood running cold. The husband steps out of the shadows, gun in hand. The private-eye fumbles for his. Too late. Three shots ring out.

I stopped reading, my heart thumping in my chest.

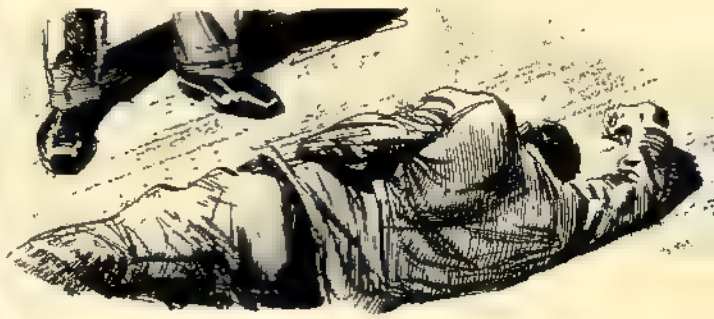
I listened.

Except for the traffic in the evening street far below, there was no sound.

I slipped the .38 from my shoulder holster and knocked off the safety catch. Harry's timing was off.

I started reading fast. I had to know what the gimmick was! The solution!

In the book, the husband stands over the fatally wounded private-eye.



'I stopped by the drug store for cigarettes,' says the husband in the book. 'I found out you learned about my reading habits. I knew you'd come back here to read the book . . . to see just how I'd murdered my wife.'

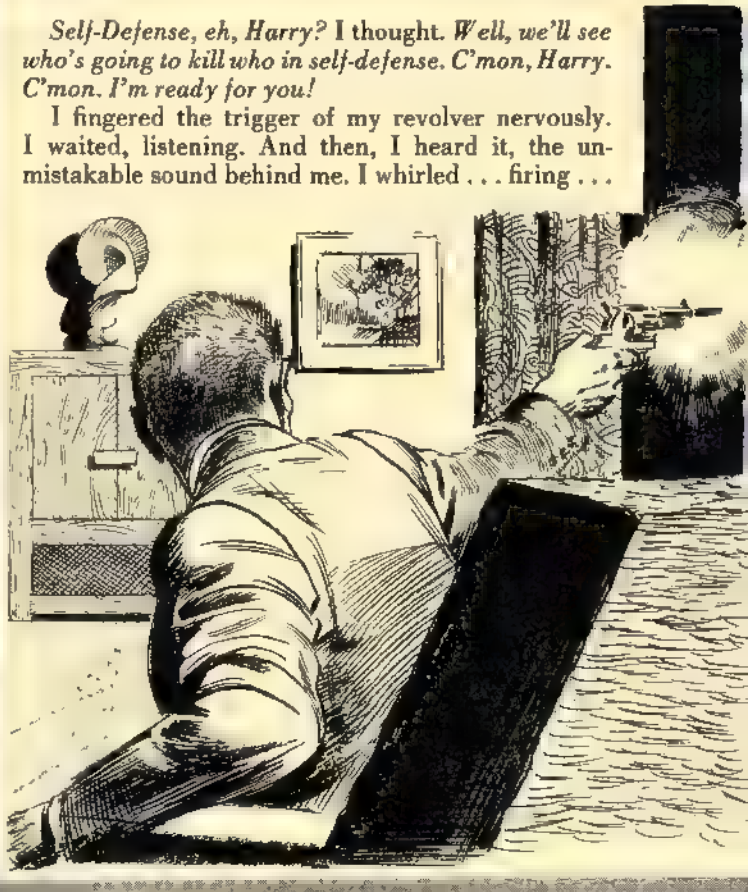
I had to read fast. Harry would be here any minute. I was coming to Harry's gimmick.

'I'll tell the cops I shot you in self-defense,' the husband in the book goes on. 'That after I shot you, you confessed to murdering my wife and removed her clothes to make it look like she left me. That then you came back, to get me! Simple. Self-defense.'

I put down the book. "Fall Guy For Murder." It was a good title. So that was Harry's game. I was supposed to be his fall guy for murder. Well, not me. I wasn't going to be anybody's fall guy. Nobody ever made a sucker out of Gregg Saunders. My palms were sweating as I gripped my .38.

*Self-Defense, eh, Harry?* I thought. *Well, we'll see who's going to kill who in self-defense. C'mon, Harry. C'mon. I'm ready for you!*

I fingered the trigger of my revolver nervously. I waited, listening. And then, I heard it, the unmistakable sound behind me. I whirled . . . firing . . .



The shots exploded through the apartment, echoing again and again as I emptied my gun. The figure in the shadows slumped to the floor.

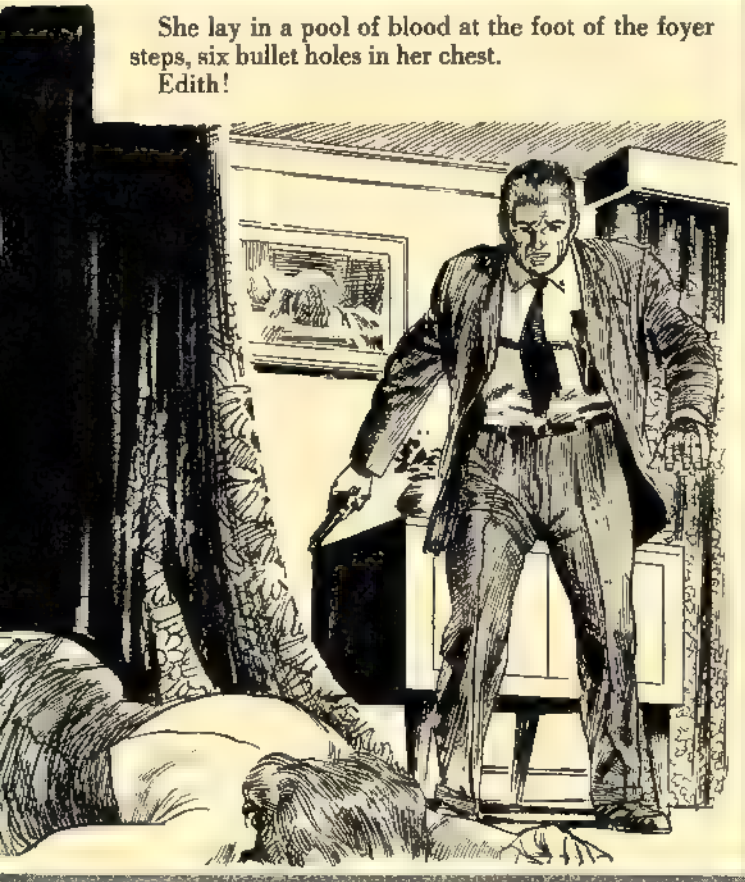
I got up, grinning. "Fall Guy For Murder" slid off my lap and onto the floor. I walked across the penthouse living room to the body.

And then, something caught in my throat, erupting, finally, through clenched teeth . . . a hoarse cry of anguish and dismay.

"Oh, my God . . ."

She lay in a pool of blood at the foot of the foyer steps, six bullet holes in her chest.

Edith!



I was crying like a baby, cradling her still form in my arms, when I heard the phone-dial clicking around. It was Harry, calling the police. He had a gun trained on me.

"If you weren't such a good detective, Gregg, my little plan would never have come off so well."

I listened, as if I knew this was only an awful nightmare from which I would awaken. Harry said a few words and then hung up. When he turned, he was grinning triumphantly.

"They're on their way. I . . . I met someone else, Gregg! Someone exciting! Edith stood in my way of finding happiness! Thanks to you, I'm rid of her!"

And that's the story. Harry'd been clever after all. He'd made me kill Edith for him. It was a diabolically shrewd scheme. I remember how his evil eyes twinkled as the sirens shrieked to a stop far below . . . how he'd picked up the book I'd just read.

"As for this, Gregg . . . this "Fall Guy For Murder." My whole plan depended on this book. You see . . .

"I wrote it!"

THE END

Below the black lattice-work of the Elevated, the street was like a dark jungle. But it was not so dark that Ben Wilson could not see the activity ahead. Just outside the entrance to a frowsy tenement wedged in between dirt-stained store windows, a huge man in dungarees, his big fist clamped tightly about her wrist, was dragging a cowering girl toward the street. When he reached the curb, he flung her arm loose and snarled, "I told you! Your sister isn't here. Take your tears somewhere else!" He turned away, snickering. "Sister! Hmmmmph! No wonder Myra feels the way she does about you. She may be a hell-cat, but she's a *woman*

In this place, at this hour, such little tableaux were not unusual. Ben would have walked on. But as he came closer, he could see the girl. She was young, softly pretty, as incongruous in her present surroundings as a rose on a garbage dump. She turned as he came closer, her face pale. She was trembling.

"Nice guy," Ben said. "Friend of yours?"

"No . . ."

Suddenly, the girl was falling. Ben caught her, held her upright.

"Say . . . you're sick," he said, concerned. "You need someplace to sit down. There's a coffee joint down the block. Maybe something hot will make you feel better." He took her arm.

"No," she drew away. "No, I couldn't. Who are you?"

"Not that it matters, but my name is Ben Wilson." Ben's smile was as gentle as he could make it. "I work near here. It's all right. I won't bite you."

Weakly, the girl let herself be led.

In the odorous eatery, Ben fed her coffee, hot and black, and presently he knew her name. Ruth Carr. She looked about her, at the unshaven counterman, at the scaborous wallpaper hanging from the dingy, greasy walls. She shuddered.

"Please. I . . . I'd like to go home. This place is like . . . like Myra," she said disgustedly.

"Myra?" Ben asked.

"My sister," said Ruth. "We're twins. Please. I don't want to talk about her. Not now."

Ben took Ruth home, to a clean brownstone rooming house on the other side of town. There were tears in her eyes again when she thanked him. It was because of the tears, mainly, that he said he'd stop by the next day. The tears, and a certain odor of mystery . . .

He went back the next morning. And when he came into Ruth's room, she was lying on the bed, sobbing hysterically, and the room was a shambles, as if someone swept up in an ungovernable rage had set out upon a calculated rampage of destruction.

When Ben pulled Ruth to a sitting position, she was almost incoherent.

"Ruth, what is this? Who did it?"

"Myra," she sobbed. "It was Myra! Ben, I . . . I've got to talk about it or go mad."

"She called me names. She said I was spying on her. I . . . I think she's insane."

"Easy, honey. Easy. Look, maybe you better begin at the beginning." Ben's voice was soothing.

"All right," Ruth sighed. "It . . . it started about six months ago. Myra and I lived here together. Six months ago, I became ill. And Myra began to change. I don't know why! But she did. She . . . she used to laugh at me. As if she hated me! As if she *wanted* to see me suffer! She became cheap, loud . . ."

Ruth's voice faltered, faded, began anew. "Last month she moved out. She never comes here any more. Except when she's angry. Like today."

"Angry?" Ben looked around. "That's putting it pretty mildly. She sounds as though she belongs in an asylum!"

"No!" Ruth stared at him. "She's my sister. Ben, you don't understand. She's rotten! Bad! But she's still my sister."

"I've got to save her. From herself."

Ruth looked so helpless and gentle. So frightened. When Ben patted her on the shoulder, he was awkward. But his words came from the heart. "Sure, honey. Sure. We'll work it out. But you take it easy. Poor kid. You really need a friend, don't you?"

Ben was that friend in the weeks that followed. And it was easy to fall in love with Ruth. He proposed finally. In the park. But Ruth's mind was far away.

"Ruth!" Ben was reproachful, but not angry. He could never be angry at Ruth.

"I asked you to marry me, Ruth. Weren't you even listening?"

"I'm sorry, Ben. I guess I wasn't. I . . . I was thinking about Myra."

"You always are. I . . . I asked you to marry me." Tenderly, Ben placed a finger under Ruth's chin, raised her face. "Myra is important, Ruth. But she has nothing to do with us."

"She has," Ruth cried. "She needs me! Ben, can't you see? I can't let her go on as she is. I haven't seen her since that day she wrecked my place. I can't marry you. I can't marry anyone until I find her. I've got to!"

There was pain in Ruth's eyes. She loved Ben. He was sure of that. That was why, as she went on, he shook his head.

"Ben . . . that man! The one you saw me with that first night. He knows Myra. He'll know where to find her. I've got to go back to him."

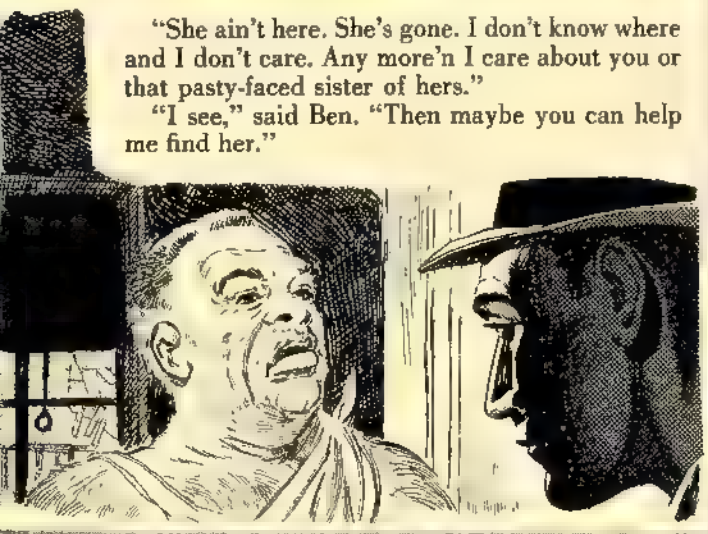
"No, Ruth. You tried. This time . . . I'll go. Maybe Myra will listen to me."

It wasn't difficult to find the man. He came to the cracked door of that frowsy tenement when Ben knocked. He stood there, filthy and bleary-eyed, with his left arm bandaged, in a sling.

"Miss Carr," he sneered. "Yeah. I know her."

"She ain't here. She's gone. I don't know where and I don't care. Any more'n I care about you or that pasty-faced sister of hers."

"I see," said Ben. "Then maybe you can help me find her."



"Find Myra?" The man held up his bandaged arm. "Fat chance! Look at this! Myra did this! With a knife! I'm glad to be rid of her! Sooner or later, she'd've slit my throat! And you want me to help you find her? If you're smart, you'll stay away from her! Far away!"

The door slammed. Ben shrugged and turned away. There would be no more help there. He went out into the garbage and paper-littered street.

Myra Carr's trail was not difficult to find. There was the neighborhood bar where she'd started a fight with a man who had picked her up. It had ended up in a free-for-all brawl, with Myra egging the contestants on. There was another bar where she'd drawn a knife on an over-painted blonde. Luckily, the bartender had pushed the blonde out of the way. He'd shown Ben the slash in the wood of the bar where Myra'd struck, missing her mark.

Ben was sick when he went back to Ruth's brownstone. But Ruth was not there. *She* was there.

A girl who looked very much like Ruth . . . who had many of Ruth's fine features . . . her eyes, her lips . . . but with a thick cake of make-up obscuring the fine outlines. A girl in a too-tight dress which accented every curve. A cheap-looking girl.

It was Myra. She snarled when Ben asked about Ruth . . . when he grasped her arms.

"Ruth isn't here! And take your dirty paws off me! She told me about you. The little hero!"

Those eyes. There was murder in them. Ben was almost afraid. But he did not let go. And suddenly, a clawed hand was raking talon-like fingernails across his face.

"I told you to let me go," she screamed.

Ben let go. Myra crouched, cat-like.

"Ruth ran out when I came in, if you must know! She's afraid of me! Because she knows how much I hate her! As much as I hate you and all your kind! My life is my own affair! Stay out of it! Keep your preaching to yourself, or you'll wish you had!"

There was no mistaking the murderous fury in those slitted eyes. Ben recoiled . . . and Myra smiled evily. "I scare you, too, don't I? And you want to reform me! You! A whining milk-sop! What do you know about me? What do you know about anything?"

Swiftly, the woman gathered up a few things, walked to the door, every swing of her hips accenting her lurid cheapness. She *was* insane! She was dangerous! "I warn you," she turned. "You and that whining sister of mine, both. Keep out of my life!"

Ben was shaking when she left. Myra was something primitive . . . something that would not hesitate to lie, cheat . . . or kill. Ruth's mad sister was a woman beyond convention, beyond any thought or care except the pleasures of the body. And woe to the man or woman who attempted to interfere with those pleasures.

After an hour, Ben left the apartment. Ruth did not come back. *No wonder*, Ben thought.

He saw her again the following day. She huddled in his arms, fragile and afraid, sobbing. He had to say what he did.

"Ruth, there just isn't any other way! You must see that! It's the only solution!"

"Myra has got to be put away . . . somewhere where she can't hurt anyone. For your sake! There's no telling what she may do the next time she comes."

"Ben, I can't," Ruth sobbed. "I can't make a complaint. I . . . I know Myra. She'd fight! It would be horrible. Myra is just . . . sick."

Ben nodded. "Sick . . . and dangerous. She needs care. She needs a doctor. A psychiatrist."

It was no use, though. Not that Ben could blame Ruth. Myra was, after all, her flesh and blood. He tried . . . and gave up. There was only one way left.

"All right," he said. "Forget about making a complaint. Suppose . . . suppose I went to her? I think I can find her now. Suppose I could get her to see a doctor of her own free will?"

"Myra is . . . is sick, but she's intelligent. She might go if . . . if I explained how much it means to both of us. As much as she hates us, there must be something decent left in her."

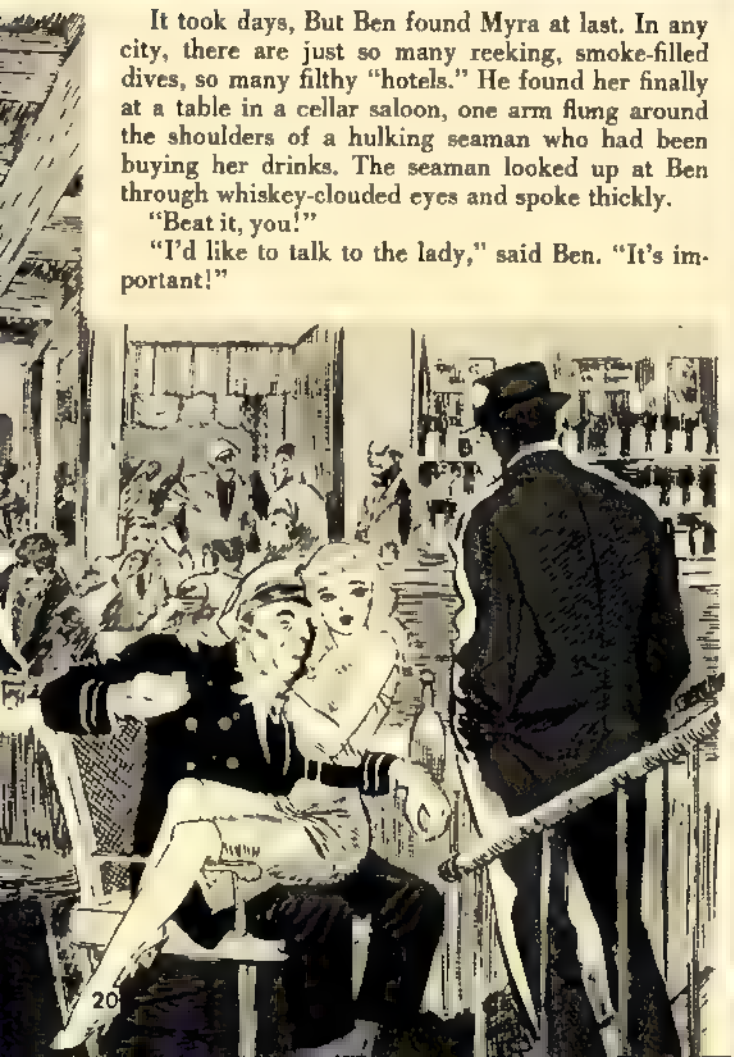
"No, Ben," Ruth shook her head. "You met her. You know what she'll say."

"I know. But I've still got to try, honey." He kissed her on the cheek. "I want to marry you, remember? It's the only way out, for all of us."

It took days, But Ben found Myra at last. In any city, there are just so many reeking, smoke-filled dives, so many filthy "hotels." He found her finally at a table in a cellar saloon, one arm flung around the shoulders of a hulking seaman who had been buying her drinks. The seaman looked up at Ben through whiskey-clouded eyes and spoke thickly.

"Beat it, you!"

"I'd like to talk to the lady," said Ben. "It's important!"



"Lady!" The seaman roared. "Her?"

"Shut up!" Myra got to her feet. The seaman rose in protest. Myra shoved him hard and he sprawled his length on the dirty, stained floor, too drunk to rise.

"All right, milk-sop. I'll listen. But it had better *be* important! I told you once before to stay out of my life."

At the rear of the dive, there was a tiny room. Myra led the way. She stood at a grimy window while Ben talked, staring out at the dirty street where ragged bums walked aimlessly. The room reeked of cheap perfume and the unmade bed was sour and wrinkled.

"Myra," Ben was uneasy. He hesitated, then went on. "Myra, I . . . I don't know how to say this, but Ruth has told me things. About how close you used to be. How you had the same plans, the same interests."

"That was long ago," Myra snapped. "Before I woke up. I don't live in the same world with Ruth any more. I live here, in *my* world. And I like it."

It was back. The expression of murderous fury in Myra's eyes. Her lips writhed.

"Is this what you came for? To get me to go back? To be like Ruth again?"

"Yes," said Ben. "Ruth only wants to help you. Come back with me. Talk to her."

In the semi-gloom, Myra's eyes seemed to flame. She moved toward him. A hundred and twenty pounds of softness against his hundred and sixty, and yet he stepped back. He shrank away.

"Get out of here!" It was said softly, hissed, the way a cobra might before it struck. "I hate my sister. I hate the kind of life she lives. I hate her goodness. She's dead, and she doesn't know it. She doesn't know what living means. I've learned. I know. And I like what I know. So . . . get out!"

Ben wanted to run. The menace . . . the evil that flowed from her was strong. But this was for Ruth. So he stayed, and faced her.

"You don't know what you're saying . . . what you're doing to yourself. Can't you see what you've become?"

"I've become what I wanted to become!"

"Because you don't know any better. You can't think clearly." He was angry now, shouting. "You're out of your mind!"

Almost as soon as he'd said the words, Ben regretted them. That was not the way! But it was too late. As if in slow motion, he watched Myra's lips curl back in a snarl, watched her bend, saw the glitter as she drew the slim sliver of steel from its sheath strapped to her thigh.

"That's why you really came here," she snarled, "Isn't it? To tell me that I'm insane!"

She came at him with the knife held low, her face a mask of murderous hate. She came at him, cursing, swearing . . . like an animal.

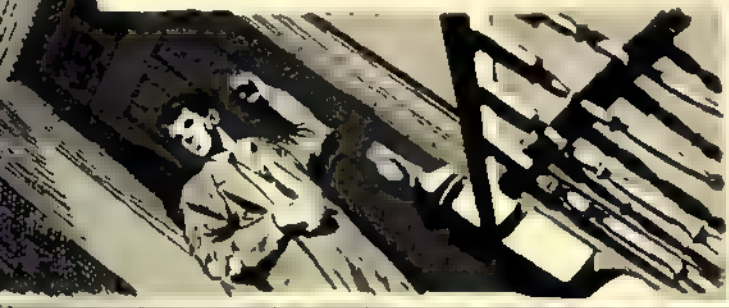
Somehow, he grabbed hold of her wrist and twisted. The knife slipped from her hand and thudded to the floor. He tore away, leaving part of his jacket in her clawed fist.

Myra was on the floor, where he'd thrown her, when he left. She screamed after him.

"You won't get away from me! Neither of you! I warned you, but you wouldn't listen to me! I'll still kill you! I'll kill you both!"

Myra's words rang in Ben's ears as he fled. Ruth had to be told! He had to get her away! Myra would come after her.

When he got to the brownstone, his lungs were on fire, but he took the steps to Ruth's room two at a time. He pounded on her door.



"Ruth! Please! Open up! It's me . . . Ben!" His voice was a gasp.

Ruth's landlady found him like that, pounding and shouting through the locked door.

"Miss Carr isn't in, young man. You don't have to break the door down."

"Where is she? I've got to see her!" Ben was almost hysterical. "It's a matter of life and death!"

The landlady didn't know where Ruth was. But there was no mistaking Ben's sincerity. She let him into Ruth's room to wait.

"There you are," she said, stepping back from the unlocked door. "You can wait inside for her."

"Thank you," said Ben. "You're certain you don't know where Miss Carr is?"

"I'm certain. She went out hours ago. But she didn't say where." The landlady turned to go.

"If she comes in," Ben added, "Tell her I'm waiting. And . . . if her *sister* comes, let me know! Right away! Don't let her sister know I'm here!"

The landlady stared at him. "Sister? Miss Carr's sister? Why, I didn't know she had one! Look here, young man. Are you sober?" The landlady was suddenly suspicious.

"Ruth doesn't have a sister? But . . . Myra. She lived with Ruth . . . here! Ruth told me so. They're twins!"

"Indeed!" The landlady was annoyed now. "I should think I know who rents my rooms. This room has never been rented by twins. There's just one girl living here! You must be mixed up, young man!"

"I . . . I see," said Ben.

But Ben didn't see. He didn't see at all. The landlady's suspicious stare steadied him, though.

"Of course. I forgot. Ruth told me. She never mentioned her twin sister to you. I . . . I just assumed Myra lived here with Ruth. How stupid of me!"

He smiled warmly and the landlady accepted his explanation grudgingly. She left him alone. For an hour he sat on the bed, waiting, thinking, trying to marshall his thoughts. Then, very deliberately, he began to search the room.

There was nothing. Nothing that might affirm the nagging thought which he so resolutely attempted to put out of his mind.

He was sitting on the bed again when the landlady opened the door.

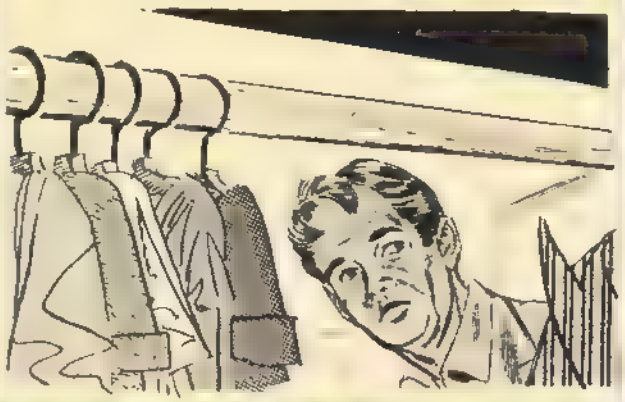
"I just thought I'd tell you. I have to go out, young man, so I won't be able to let you know if Miss Carr . . . or her *sister* comes in."

The word "sister" was accented caustically. But the landlady must have been satisfied with her quiescent attitude, because she closed the door and left him alone again.

After that, he sat in a house silent as a tomb, staring at the blank door of a closed closet . . .

The closet! He hadn't looked there! He went to it, flung it open.

There was a neat row of dresses. Some of them, Ben had seen before. Sedate, sweetly feminine dresses, faintly accented with the familiar lavendar scent which was so much a part of Ruth.

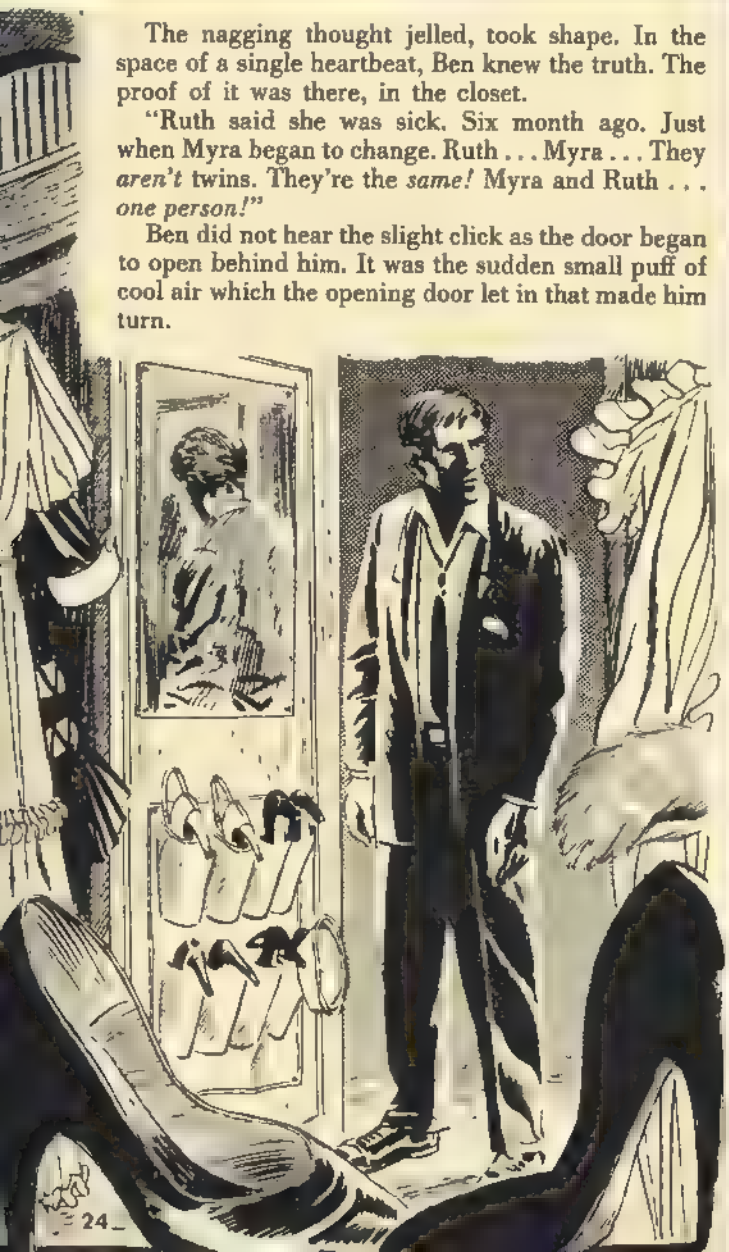


But those dresses occupied only one-half of the closet. The other half held more dresses. Garish prints, spangles, beads. Below them were sensuous-looking shoes with long spike heels and gaudy straps. Above, on a shelf, there were bottles of cheap perfume and make-up.

The nagging thought jelled, took shape. In the space of a single heartbeat, Ben knew the truth. The proof of it was there, in the closet.

"Ruth said she was sick. Six month ago. Just when Myra began to change. Ruth . . . Myra . . . They *aren't* twins. They're the *same!* Myra and Ruth . . . *one person!*"

Ben did not hear the slight click as the door began to open behind him. It was the sudden small puff of cool air which the opening door let in that made him turn.



He stood there, in the twilight dimness of the room, staring at the silhouette of the girl framed in the doorway. He could not see who it was. He could only stand there.

Stand there with the sweat beading out on his forehead, in a trembling agony of fear, seeing once again a gleaming sliver of steel, a pair of slitted eyes glowing with an evil hate born in Hell . . .

Ruth . . . or Myra? A girl who loved him, or a girl driven by a maniacal lust to kill? Which one? *Which one was it?*

THE END

# FOOL'S GOLD

Over everything was the stench of the pigs. It clung to the crazily leaning fence. It hovered above the grimy house with the dirty rags stuffed into the openings where window glass had been. It rose in a cloying miasma from the faded, wrinkled blue jeans of the two men.

They stood in the pigpen, facing each other. And the hate in the younger man's heart was as black as the muck which caked his boots. But he did not swing the shovel which he had raised overhead in his sudden weak rage. He was a coward and he had never been able to stand up to that vicious, too-cunning smile which now broke his uncle's gaunt unshaven face into a hundred stubbled wrinkles.

"Pigs . . . pigs!" The boy's voice cracked, whined. "I *was* feeding 'em their slop, wasn't I? You got no call t' be hollerin' at me all the time. 'Slop the pigs!' 'Clean the pens!' 'Do this!' 'Do that!' "

"Then why not *end* it, Cal?" The old face still smiled. "Why not split my skull, like you been dreamin' about doing for so long?"

The old face smiled. Then, suddenly, the smile was gone. Suddenly the face was hard. A bony arm whipped out. Dirty fingers cracked against the boy's cheek, loud in the stillness.

"I'll tell you why! 'Cause you ain't got the gumption. Because you like livin' on my charity too much!"

This time, Cal's voice was a shriek. There were tears of rage on his cheeks as he fingered his welted jaw. But he made no move to strike back.

"Charity! You know better'n that! Half this place is *mine!* You *know* it is!"

The old man turned away. "Nothin' that's here is yours! And you don't mean nothin' t' me, even if you are my kin. But, them pigs do! They mean cash! So you'll tend 'em . . . or get out."

It was then that Cal saw Angie. Angie was the hired girl. A big girl, full blown, with a soft, healthy body and voluptuous lips. She'd been watching, and even from where he stood, Cal could see the contempt in her expression. Contempt. And only last night . . . Cal shivered. Angie was cheap. Easy. But she was the only girl Cal had ever really known.

The shovel rang as he flung it furiously against the fence.

Angie had turned and followed the old man into the house. And Cal had seen how his uncle had looked at her. His uncle . . . who owned the place . . . who could buy her things.

That thought was with Cal afterwards, when he sat in the kitchen with his uncle and ate the coarse food Angie had prepared. It gnawed at him when he saw the glitter in the old man's eyes . . . and the invitation in Angie's.

Later, he caught Angie alone . . . outside . . . near the pens, where the fat sows rooted contentedly. He came up behind her and put his arms around her, but she shook herself free impatiently.

"Angie, don't." Cal understood, too well. "Angie, he . . . he's an old man. He's probably a murderer. You . . . you liked *me* well enough last night."

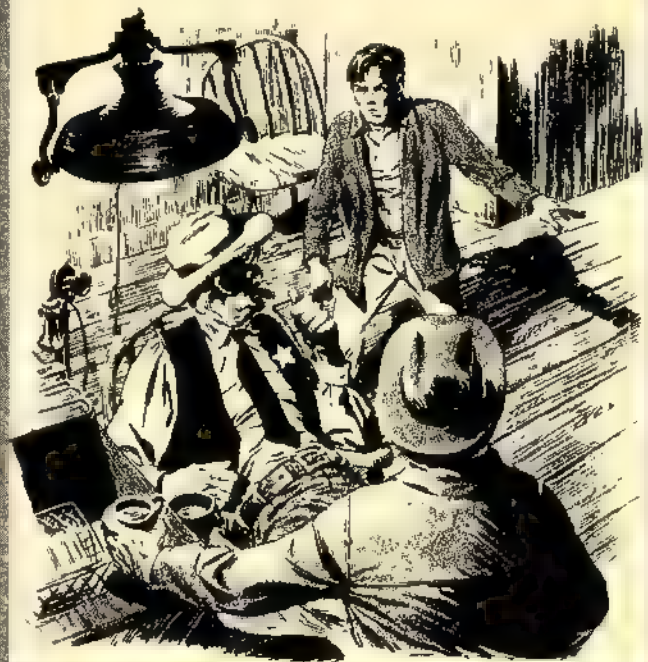
"I still like you, Cal." Angie's face was white in the moonlight. "But I've liked lots of men."

"You mean you think my Uncle Josh has money. That's why you're playing up to him. You think I'm not your man because I ain't got anything. Well, I'll show you, Angie! One of these days, I'll show you!"

The hate . . . the black poisonous hate. It drove Cal down the dirt road to town, later, past the skeleton trees. There was a deputy with the sheriff when he burst into the office. But neither man listened too closely to Cal when the words began to spill from his lips. When he had finished, the sheriff shook his head.

"Cal, why don't you quit?" he said. "I've told you. You've got no claim on that pig farm. It belongs to your uncle. When your pa disappeared, everything went to him. He and your Pa were partners and that was their agreement."

"Yeah," Cal snapped. "And *why* did Pa disappear? Because Uncle Josh murdered him! For the gold he had! Everybody knows it!"



"Nobody knows it, Cal," said the sheriff. "Your Pa was a tightfisted man. He kept his money in gold coins. All right. So, one day, he took his gold and ran off. No one's proved different."

"You're like your pa, Cal." That was the deputy. "And like your Uncle Josh, too. Mean . . . and greedy. Why don't you just forget it?"

"Because half of everything my uncle has is mine! I got a right to it. And some day, I'll prove he killed my Pa. Some day . . ."

"When you do, you can come tell us, Cal," said the sheriff. "Till then, there ain't no charges against your uncle. We're busy."

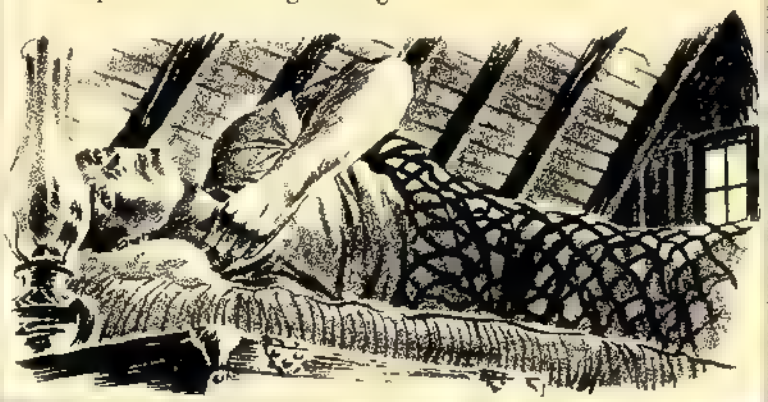
Twenty years! For twenty years it had been like that. Ever since Cal was two. The hate grew as he walked back. In a heart already full of hate, he could still find room for more, and more, and more.

Angie avoided him after that night. She set her sights on the old man. And she made no pretense of hiding it. Why should she? She hovered over him . . . found reason to be near him. And the old man would smile his wrinkled smile.

He knew why. He'd smile at Cal, and his smile would say, "See, Cal? I'm old. I'm not young like you. But I've got what Angie wants. Money. *Your money!*"

And Cal would watch Angie fawning over the old man and the hate in his heart would grow . . . and grow . . . and grow.

There were nights when Cal would lie on his mattress in the attic, writhing, because he'd be thinking about Angie and the old man. Nights when his wracked brain conjured up pictures that tortured, until, in his desperation, he'd bite his own arm to keep from screaming his rage.



It was the pictures, at last, which drove him to spy. There was a night when he crouched outside the house and saw his uncle's stubbled lips brush Angie's cheek . . . saw Angie let herself be held and then pull away . . .

He watched as the old man followed her out onto the porch, greedily.

"Angie," he heard Josh plead. "What do you want? I've got money. Just tell me. Be nice, Angie."

Angie was a white flower in the darkness. A flower with its roots sunk deep in muck.

"I'm a good girl, Josh," she whispered. "And good girls get married."

There was more. Angie spoke her lines cleverly, used her charms cleverly. And Cal heard it all. Even the part where the old man mouthed promises of pretty dresses, and jewelry, and cologne. And when Angie went inside, Cal stayed, crouching behind the broken porch . . . hating.

He watched the old man go to the pigpen. He watched him pick up a shovel and begin to dig. He watched him spade aside the black mud and from it, take a rotting canvas sack that spilled gold coins.

Gold coins . . . that would buy pretty dresses, and jewelry, and cologne!

Cal saw it all. He saw his uncle take a handful of the coins and rebury the rest. He saw him go back into the house.

Cal did not dig up the rotting sack. There would be time for that. He stood in the night, and thought.

So, it was all true. Josh *had* killed his Pa for the gold. But, if he went to the sheriff, there would be questions . . . a trial, delay.

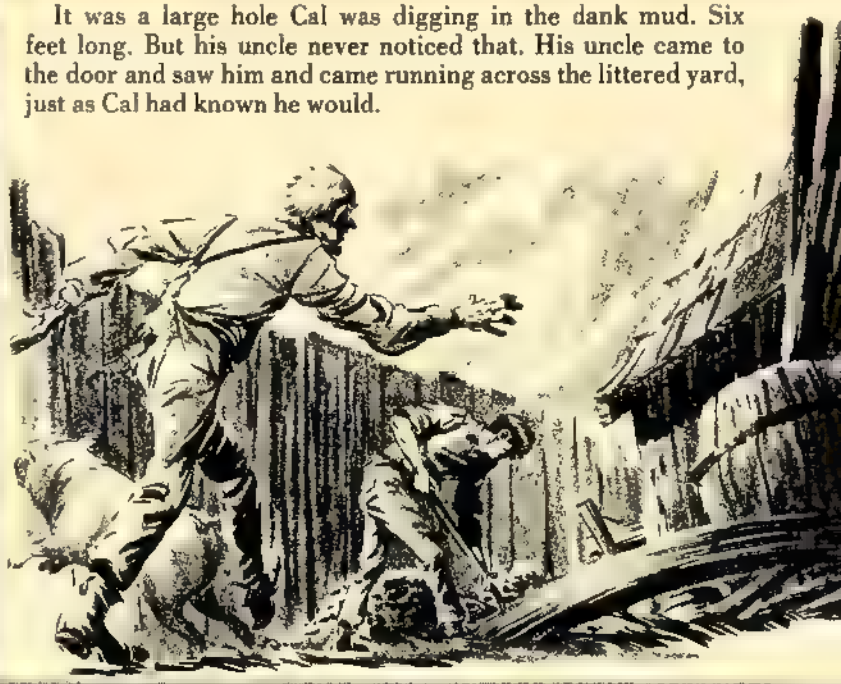
Cal went up to his lumpy mattress. He thought all night, quite calmly. And by morning, he knew what he had to do.

He was first up at daylight. He found Angie and told her that his uncle wanted her to go into town to buy some supplies. He had the list all ready, and Angie went, unsuspecting.

Then he waited. It was easy to wait, now . . . because the bitter vine of his hate was about to bear its bitter fruit.

When his uncle came downstairs, dry and wrinkled in the way of old men who sleep heavily, Cal was out in the pens, digging.

It was a large hole Cal was digging in the dank mud. Six feet long. But his uncle never noticed that. His uncle came to the door and saw him and came running across the littered yard, just as Cal had known he would.



"You . . . what are you doing there? Get away from there! Who told you to dig there?" The parched voice cracked. The bony arms flailed. Uncle Josh was afraid! The way Cal had been afraid!

Josh was afraid that Cal would find the sack. But Cal was being clever. He was digging, yes. But not where the sack was. He was digging near it.

"Mornin', Uncle Josh. Somethin' wrong? I figured I'd turn over some of this pig slop, an' . . ."

"No!" It was almost a scream. "Get away from there!" The old man was near hysterics. He shoved Cal aside, dropped to his hands and knees. It did not seem to matter to him that the muck coated his hands and wrists, his knees . . .

Cal struck.

The shovel came down in a sweeping arc that split the old man's skull like a rotten apple. He fell forward, face down. And the black mud welcomed him, seemed to gather him in, as if he were already part of it.

The mud was a different color where he lay. Deep red. But the red sank into the filth, turned brown, and vanished.

Cal was sick. He stumbled to the fence, leaned his head against it, and it was as if his insides wanted to twist themselves free of his body. Every pore streamed sweat. It left him weak and trembling. But it passed. In time, he was able to finish digging. He had to roll the old man's body into the grave. When it fell, he wanted to grin, crazily. The old man looked like a big ball of mud.

Carefully, Cal filled in the grave. Then he dug up the rotting sack, and the cool wet feel of the yellow coins was balm to his hot calloused hands.

He was all packed and ready to leave when the truck drove into the yard. *It wasn't fair! He wasn't deserving of such rotten luck!* Suddenly, his knees would hardly support him.

*But he knew the man in the truck! What had he to fear?* He swallowed hard and went out to meet him.

"Mr. Marks! What brings you down this way?" He wondered if Marks heard the tremor in his voice.

"Pigs! What else?" Marks snapped.

"I'm fresh out of pork down at my place. So I stopped by to pick some up." Marks looked around. "Your uncle in?"

"No," Cal thought quickly. "Uncle Josh had to go into town . . ."

Marks suspected nothing! Of course not! Why should he? The fear flowed out of Cal. Suddenly, he was aware of himself. So sure! He was cleverer than Marks. Cleverer than the sheriff. Cleverer than Uncle Josh.

"... But, I can make the deal," he said confidently.

Cal haggled. He could do that now. He could bargain the price of three pigs while Uncle Josh lay buried not thirty feet away, beneath the slime of the pen. It made Cal feel drunk.

When Marks drove away with the pigs, Cal was eighty dollars richer. Everything was going his way now. Everything.

Everything, except one thing. Angie. Cal thought about Angie, and his face went hot. He could feel her close to him, as she'd been that night ...

He waited for her. He sat in the kitchen, thinking his thoughts of Angie. He sat for hours, not moving, with the blood pounding in his temples and the palms of his hands wet with eagerness, until he heard footsteps fall on the porch, until he heard the door open ...

"Angie," he began.

But it wasn't Angie. The sheriff and his deputy came in quietly ... grimly. And their eyes were hard. Like the eyes of men who have seen something that had better remain hidden.

Behind them came Mr. Marks.

"Evenin', Cal." The sheriff took the lead. "We came to see your Uncle Josh. You told Marks, here, that he went to town, but we couldn't find him. Did he get back yet?"

"No. No, not yet," Cal's words were a croak.

"Just as well," said the sheriff. "Show it to him, Marks."

Marks held out a hand. There was something in his palm. Something that gleamed yellow.

"I reckon we all owe you an apology, Cal," the sheriff said softly. "Marks found that gold piece in the belly of one of the pigs you sold him today. The way I see it, the pig gobbled it up along with his slops ..."

Cal tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. There was a rope about his throat, strangling him.

"Gold coins are mighty scarce these days," the sheriff went on. "So I figured we'd have a look around. Especially down by the pigpens. Maybe them stories about your uncle murderin' your Pa and stealin' his gold weren't just stories after all."

"You're going to look . . . in the pigpen?"

"Yep. Where there's one gold piece, there may be more. A little diggin' ought to tell us."

There was no thought behind what Cal did then. He suddenly saw a picture of a shovel turning up black muck, uncovering a human arm. He saw an old man's corpse being lifted . . .

It was an animal that charged the sheriff. A fear-crazed thing that screamed garbled words and broke past the three men who were suddenly only reaching . . . grasping at nothing.

Cal almost made it. He got to the door, flung it open, and crashed into something white and soft.

He fell in a sprawled heap, entangled with the something.

It was Angie. That much Cal realized before the sheriff and the others were on him. It was Angie's softness which had stopped Cal. The same softness which had set the blood pounding in his head in the beginning. Now, it was a trap. A death sentence.

"Hold him," the sheriff barked.

"No! Let me go! I haven't done anything. Let me go!"

Cal struggled, but there were three of them. He was bruised, cut, and bleeding when they pulled him to his feet at last.

"Let me go," he snarled. "I haven't done . . ."

"A man who hasn't done anything doesn't run!" The sheriff turned to Marks and the deputy. "There's more that's got a bad smell 'round here than just pigs. Watch him. I'm goin' out an' see what's in the pigpen that's got him so all-fired scared."

Angie sat opposite Cal afterwards. Angie was frightened. When Cal turned to her, pleading with his eyes, she turned away. The deputy had explained to her, and Angie's expression was withdrawn, cold. There would be no help there.

Cal hated her. As he'd hated his uncle. He was alone. He would be alone when they walked him to the gallows. He gagged on the thought. He could think now. But his thoughts were skeleton fingers plucking at his insides. After a while, he buried his sweating face in his arms, and it was so that time passed.

But it wasn't long. Not really. It only seemed long. It seemed to Cal that he could hear the sheriff's shovel outside, sucking as it spaded aside the muck. Even here, with his eyes closed and his face buried, it seemed to him that he could see the shovel lifting the last clod from that horribly split old man's face with its sudden expression of pain and fear frozen upon it for all eternity.

Cal knew, when the sheriff came back into the house. He knew from the way the sheriff looked at him. He knew, from the expression of horror in the sheriff's face, that Uncle Josh was no longer buried under three feet of pigpen mud. And the knowing brought Cal a strange sort of calm.

"So . . . you found him," he whispered.

"Yeah," said the sheriff. "You better come outside, Cal."

It was all over now. Done. Cal shrugged.

They all went out into the dirty yard, past the crazily leaning fence. And even with the stench hanging heavy, the night air smelled cool and fresh to Cal. Funny. He'd never noticed how nice the air could be. Just air. Just living. Breathing. Free.

And now . . .

"I don't want to see him," he screamed.

The rage came back. The hate. The old man . . . he must be laughing, even now. He'd stolen everything. He'd made Cal a beggar. He'd treated him like a servant. He'd filled him with hate. And in the end, he was still the victor.

"No! I don't want to see him!"

"All right, Cal. You don't have to," the sheriff said softly. He was almost kind. Maybe . . . maybe he'd understand.

"He . . . he deserved to die!" Cal almost shrieked it. "Sheriff . . . you know! He made my life a hell! He was mean! He was rotten! He kept naggin' me, talkin' at me! And there was Angie! He tried to take Angie! He'd have married her! An old man! An old man like that didn't have no right to a girl like Angie! I did! And when I saw the gold, I knew how I could have her . . ."

No one moved. No one said a word. But they had to understand. They had to!

"All right! All right, look at me like I was dirt! Maybe I am! But I'm glad I killed him! I'd do it again! Uncle Josh didn't belong in the same world with decent people! I'm glad he's dead!"

By now, they were at the pigpen. The sheriff led the way, shaking his head.

"You shouldn't have done it, Cal. Too bad. You most likely will hang now . . . even if your Uncle Josh did need killin'. But you should have waited!"

The sheriff led the way and then he stopped and pointed. Down at the muck.

There was no corpse. There was something else. Bones, with whisps of rotted cloth still clinging here and there.

Cal stared.

The sheriff's voice was soft. He spoke the way a man might at a funeral . . . or an execution.

"When I said I found him, I wasn't talkin' about Josh, Cal. What I found was these. Bones. They've been buried here maybe twenty years, from the look of them. Right where your uncle most likely put 'em!

"I found your Pa, Cal!"

THE END

# FAREWELL TO ARMS

Stander was tired . . . deathly tired. The corpse on his back and the chains in his pocket made an intolerable weight. But it would be over soon. All the way, the refrain that his brain had taken up when he'd strangled Margaret had beat in his head, seeming to keep time with the icy wind that shrieked about him: "This is the last time. The last. The last." Never again would he have to endure the loathesome touch of those fat, pale-gleaming arms that now held him in an ironic embrace.

It was a long way across the wet sand. The tide was a good mile out. And it was cold. Despite the perspiration that drenched him, Stander could feel the chill.

Stander had hoisted Margaret's corpse onto his back, with her fat arms about his neck, so that he could carry her pickaback across the tideland. When his cheek touched her dead skin, there was a searing sensation of cold so intense that it seemed to burn.

Still, Stander staggered on. He had planned his time-table carefully. There would be just enough time to carry the body to the water's edge . . . drop it, weighted with the chains in his pocket . . . and return before the tide came sweeping back in. There would be no corpse for the police to discover this time. Stander couldn't risk that. There had been too many questions, too many anxious stares when Lester had died. He had learned a lot from Lester's death. Experience is a valuable thing. Even in murder.

* * * * *

Poor Lester. He'd been so unlike Margaret. Where the mother had been fat and soft, the son had been lean, almost cadaverous. Stander had met him at college. They'd been room-mates. And it had taken Stander just ten minutes to decide that he was going to marry Lester's mother. It had happened when the registrar assigned them the same room . . .

After the introductions, Lester had unpacked a photograph of a fat middle-aged woman, framed in gold. He'd set it upon the dresser. "My mother," he'd said. But he'd said it bitterly.

At first, only idle curiosity had made Stander ask questions. As he'd unpacked, moving about the room with his inherent athlete's grace, his handsome face had revealed nothing of what had been going on in his mind.

Yet Lester's answers, given gratefully, as if Lester were starved for friendship, had told Stander that Margaret Kingsley was a widow, that she was wealthy, and that she was a fool who sought the company of young people in a never-ending effort to recapture her own youth.

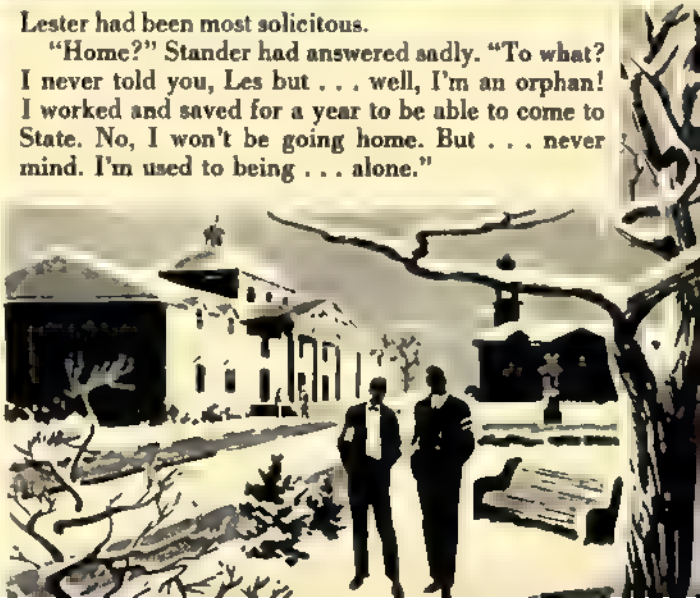
From that day on, Stander had made himself Lester's boon companion. He smiled now as he recalled how he'd gotten Lester to invite him home for the Easter Holidays. It hadn't even been necessary for him to be clever. After their last class, when he and Lester were strolling across the campus, he'd remarked casually about how beautiful the weather was and . . .

"It's going to be pretty lonesone around here after you're gone, Les."

"But . . . you'll be going home for the holidays, won't you?"

Lester had been most solicitous.

"Home?" Stander had answered sadly. "To what? I never told you, Les but . . . well, I'm an orphan! I worked and saved for a year to be able to come to State. No, I won't be going home. But . . . never mind. I'm used to being . . . alone."



"Alone? You?" Lester had been shocked. "Why, you're one of the most popular men on the campus! You've got a dozen girls eating out of your hand!"

"Sure. But . . . it isn't like having a family!" He'd hung his head. "It isn't like having someone who *really* cares about you, is it? But I'll be okay. Forget it."

"Ralph," Les had bitten. "Ralph, I've got a wonderful idea . . ."

So Lester had invited Stander to come with him, and Stander had protested weakly and then given in. He'd gone with Lester to that big house, and he'd met Margaret.

Stander shuddered. That very first day, Margaret had put those fat arms around him, mouthing her platitudes, while he'd writhed inwardly at the soft, old feel of her.

"You poor darling. Lester has told me all about you. Well, we'll see to it that you aren't lonely."

Lonely? Stander? A man who feels nothing for others, who is incapable of any emotion that is not completely selfish, can *never* be lonely! But the old cow hadn't known that.

For the first few days, Stander had enjoyed the big house, the servants, the good food. He'd played the part of a foster son perfectly. Then, there had been the time when he'd admired one of Margaret's three automobiles. He'd taken her for a drive . . .

The drive had somehow extended itself . . . for hours . . . so that, after sunset, they'd been far out in the country, parked on a lonely road.

Stander had put his arm across the back of the seat, behind Margaret. And she'd giggled.

"Ralph! What . . . What on earth are you doing?"

"Don't you know, Margaret?" he'd said, hotly.

He'd moved close to her, tightening his grip about her shoulders. He'd whispered.

"It . . . it *is* all right if I call you Margaret, isn't it? Somehow, it hasn't seemed right calling you Mrs. Kingsley. It . . . makes you sound so old. And you're not old! You're not! If you were, I . . . I could never feel this way about you. I could never . . ."

Artfully, he'd trailed his voice off. He'd shaken his head. He'd moved away.

"No! This isn't right! Margaret, forgive me. I have no right to say such things. I . . . I was just talking. Please. Forgive me . . . and forget what I said. We . . . we'd better be getting back."

Margaret hadn't said a word on the return drive. But he'd felt her eyes, afterward. He'd seen how she'd primped when he was near. It hadn't been an accident when he'd "found" her in the rose arbor. He'd stood for a moment, staring at her, before he'd let the words come . . . slowly, with the consummate skill of an artist.

"I didn't know you were here. But I . . . I'm glad you are. The way you're standing, with the roses behind you, you're so . . . so beautiful."

That had been the second time . . . the second time he'd felt those fat arms around his neck. He'd kissed her there, in the arbor . . . breathless . . . because that had been the moment. In that second, his fortune was either made, or his opportunity destroyed.

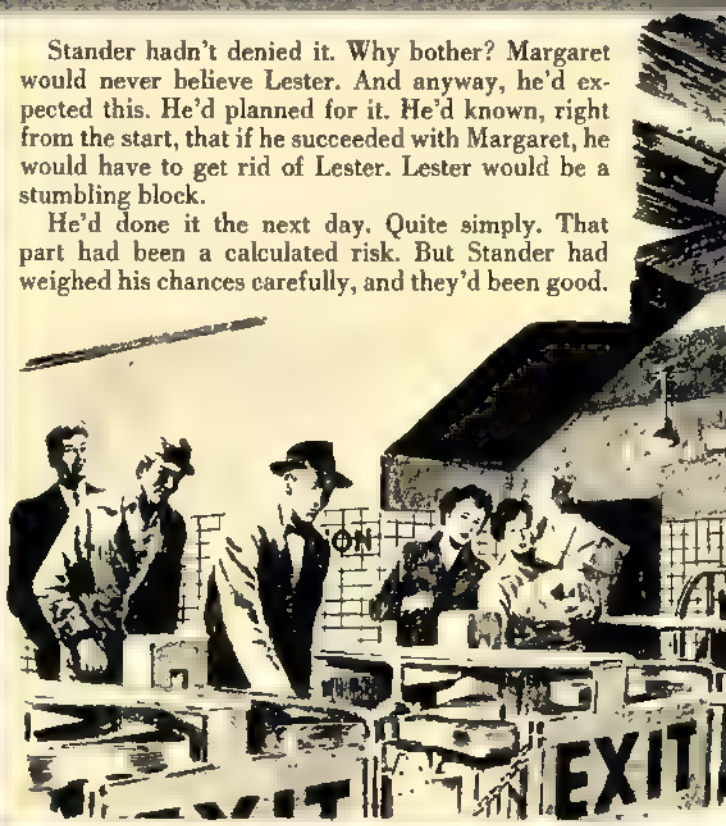
But Margaret had clasped him tight with those fat arms, and murmured stupid words of love in his ear, and he'd known that he had won.

They'd told Lester later, and he'd stared at them in shocked disbelief. At first, he'd been incredulous. Then, he'd been angry. Then, he'd raged. He'd called Stander names . . . until Margaret had burst into tears, run from the room, and left them alone.

"You'll never marry her," Lester had sworn. "I never believed those stories about you . . . about how rotten you were. But I can see now. It was all a build-up, wasn't it? Your friendship. Everything."

Stander hadn't denied it. Why bother? Margaret would never believe Lester. And anyway, he'd expected this. He'd planned for it. He'd known, right from the start, that if he succeeded with Margaret, he would have to get rid of Lester. Lester would be a stumbling block.

He'd done it the next day. Quite simply. That part had been a calculated risk. But Stander had weighed his chances carefully, and they'd been good.




He'd followed Lester into the city, and in a crowded subway, with a switch knife he'd purchased in anticipation, he'd stabbed him.

Then, he'd merely walked away from the crowd, wiped the knife carefully, and dropped it into a sewer.

He was back with Margaret when the police came. The questioning had been routine, until Margaret, through her tears, had blurted how horrible it was that this should happen now, on the very eve of her wedding. It had been enough to make the police turn to him, to ask if Lester had approved of the forthcoming marriage, to stare suspiciously.

But the calculated risk had paid off. Bristling, indignant, Margaret had come to his defense. She'd actually lied. Stander could still hear her words now, as he staggered under the weight of her fat corpse: *"You have no right to talk to my darling like that. My son and Ralph were best friends. Of course Lester didn't object to my marrying Ralph. He was happy for us. He was thrilled for me."*

No motive. The police had left. And afterwards, those fat arms had been around his neck again, as they were now. *"Oh, Ralph, Ralph, how could they? How could they be so cruel to you? Be good to me, Ralph. I'm all alone now. Like you."* How he hated the touch of those soft, pale arms.

He and Margaret had been married after a decent interval. They'd honeymooned in the beach-house she owned. Three weeks of simpering kisses and idiotic words, nauseating on the lips of a woman old enough to be his mother.

Yes, that had been horrible. And Stander might not have been able to endure his disgust, if it had not been for Irene.

Irene had come into the picture shortly after the honeymoon. Margaret had hired her as a personal maid. What was it Margaret had said? "Why, she's almost too *pretty* to be a maid. You know, darling, if I didn't know how much you love me, I'd be almost afraid to hire her."

At first, nothing had happened. He'd been no fool. Margaret doted on him. He wore ruby cuff-links, drove his own M.G., dressed in two-hundred dollar suits. What more could any man want? Stander had been content. And yet, the girl *was* pretty. Damnably pretty, with a provocative way of moving when she thought he was watching her.

Irene knew. She knew exactly how he felt about Margaret. But she was clever. She was respectful. She kept her place. He never knew if she'd deliberately engineered that final night, or if it had just happened.

Margaret had gone out. To a club meeting. She'd pouted at the thought of leaving him alone. The fat sow. He could still hear her sickening words . . .

"After all, Ralphie. We can't be love-birds *all* the time, now can we? I know how lonely you'll be. It's the servants' night out. But I won't be long. And I'll be thinking of you, darling. Every second."

She'd gone. And he'd been left alone. Or so he'd thought. Irene hadn't left the house. She'd walked into the den where he'd been sitting with a drink, a while later.

"Oh, Mr. Stander," she'd gasped. "You frightened me. I thought I was alone in the house."

"And I frightened you?" he'd smiled. "I must be slipping." His smile had been the one reserved exclusively for all attractive women. "Isn't tonight your night out?"

"Yes . . . yes, it is," she'd answered coyly. "But I thought I'd stay in and shampoo my hair. I'll . . . go to my room . . ."

"No!" He'd almost commanded her. "Why not stay here? I always hate drinking alone." The last, he'd said invitingly.

"But . . . I couldn't do that. What would Mrs. Stander think?" Irene's lips had said "*No*," but her eyes had said "*Yes*."

She'd stayed. She'd sat on the couch beside Stander, and the spice of her perfume, of her young body, had been in his nostrils.

He'd remembered, for a moment, Margaret's fat, clinging embrace. Then, he'd put her out of his mind. He'd thought only of Irene, beside him When he'd taken her in his arms and kissed her, she'd come eagerly. And that had been the beginning.

Irene had been a drug. She'd been a sporific that made him forget those disgusting moments with Margaret. In time, his need for her had become an aching, physical thing. In the end, it was inevitable that he should begin to plan how to get rid of Margaret.

This time, it had to be perfect. The police would not easily accept his innocence in the presence of a second corpse. So . . . there would have to be no corpse. Margaret would have to vanish . . . without a trace. Nor did he intend to wait seven years, until she was legally dead, to claim her fortune.

He'd begun casually, by protesting when Margaret had to make a visit to her attorney's office. A woman should not have to worry about business, he'd told her. Then, he'd become moody and irritable. To her pleas for a reason, he'd turned a deaf ear. Until, in the end, he'd put on his show of histrionics.

He'd raved and ranted. About how inadequate he felt. About his lack of any task. About how rotten it made him feel to be living off a woman It wasn't right. He should be doing something. He should be the one to handle the family finances. At least, that way he would feel as if he were earning his keep.

Margaret had given him her power of attorney after that. And, to celebrate, he'd suggested a visit to the beach-house. A second honeymoon. He could not go, of course. Not at once. He had business in town. But, wouldn't it be wonderful if she were there, waiting for him, when he arrived?

It had been inevitable that Margaret would blush and simper and agree.

Stander had not told Irene his plans. Oh, no. He was not that much of a fool. But that last night, when he'd gone to her, he'd been able to forget Margaret's clinging arms completely. For the first time. His freedom was almost at hand.

Margaret had gone to the beach-house alone. And, afterwards, Stander had driven into town. He'd registered at a small hotel, joked with the desk clerk, and gone to his room. But he'd left a call. For eight A M. Then, he'd slipped down the rear stairs.

He'd worked it out very carefully. He'd have plenty of time. No one had seen him leave the hotel. No one had seen him walk to the railroad terminal and buy his tickets, both ways, in advance. What ticket clerk would recall his face? Only the trainman might remember him, and that had been a small risk, lessened by the eyeglasses he'd worn during the ride, and the small pieces of sponge rubber in his cheeks that had completely altered his face.

It had been a short ride. When he'd disembarked, Stander had been just one of a dozen late commuters coming home to a small suburban beach town. He'd walked the three long miles to the house. (A cabbie might have remembered him.)

The tide had been far out when he'd arrived. He could see the wet sand stretching away into the darkness, unruffled by the cold wind.

Beyond, he knew, the sand dipped suddenly down to a shelf. Off the shelf was deep water. At low tide, one could reach it by walking out over the tideland. A weighted corpse, dropped off that shelf, would sink to rise no more.

The tire chains were in the garage where he'd left them a few days earlier. He'd slipped the weight of them into his pockets.

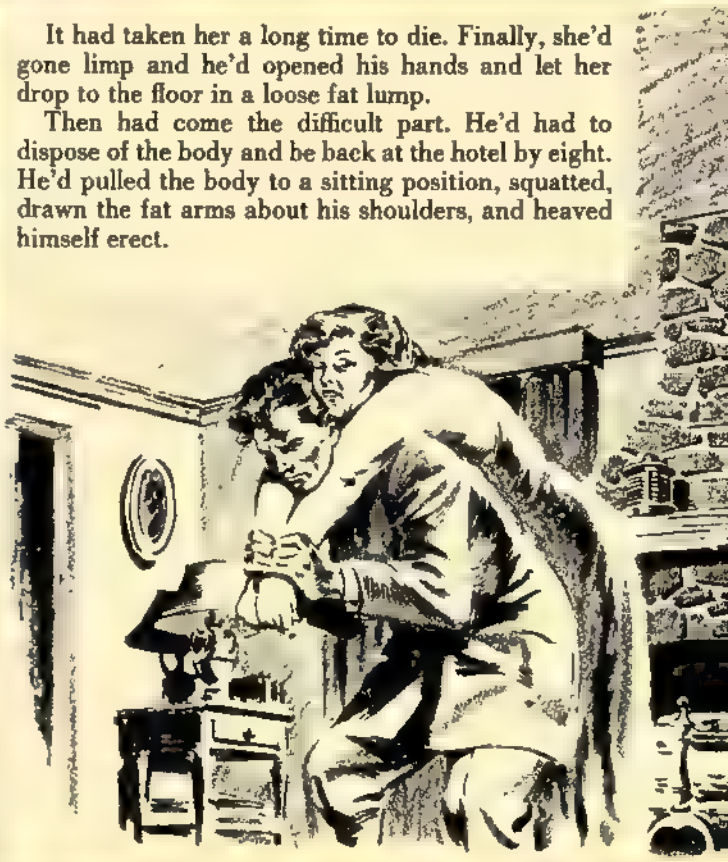
Then, he'd gone into the house. He'd carried no weapon. It had to be done quietly.

Margaret had been in the bedroom, fat and soft in a negligee. She'd run to meet him, eager for his lips. And her arms . . . those fat arms . . . had wound around his neck. That had made it so much easier. It had made the disgust rise like gall in his throat. He'd even been able to smile when he'd pushed her away and she'd pursed her lips into a small "oh" of sudden hurt.

He'd *wanted* to hurt her. For all the long months of pretending. For all the bitterly endured embraces. She'd looked just like an overstuffed rag doll when Stander had put his hands to her throat. It had felt so good to sink his thumbs into her windpipe, to see the way her eyes stared, to feel her fat little fists beating helplessly against his chest. He squeezed hard, liking it.

It had taken her a long time to die. Finally, she'd gone limp and he'd opened his hands and let her drop to the floor in a loose fat lump.

Then had come the difficult part. He'd had to dispose of the body and be back at the hotel by eight. He'd pulled the body to a sitting position, squatted, drawn the fat arms about his shoulders, and heaved himself erect.



And for the last time, he'd felt the loathsome touch of those fat pale-gleaming arms. All the way across the tide land, as he'd staggered under her weight, his brain had sung the refrain. "This is the last time. The last time. The last."

* * * * *

Stander was almost there now. The sand, where his feet left long dragging scars, was wetter here. He could see the white of the water. Further out, there were breakers. He hesitated, swaying. He was spent, exhausted. He was grateful for the icy wind that caressed his perspired face. He needed that. It would make his work difficult when he attached the chains to the body. His fingers were numb already. But the cold wind was the only thing that kept him from falling now.

The last few yards were a horror. Once, he stumbled, and it took him almost ten minutes to regain his feet under the weight of his grisly burden.

But he made it. He *had* to make it! He was almost *free!* And then, at last, there it was. Just at his feet. The white line of foam which marked the water's edge. Despite his exhaustion, despite the cold, he stood there for a moment, savoring the taste of his success.

Then he walked on . . . into the white, foaming, icy water. He was going to take no chances. Margaret's body had to be dropped beyond the shelf into deep water.

The icy sea bit at his ankles, but he could stand that. Back at the house, there was another suit, another coat . . . exact duplicates of the ones he wore. When he returned to the hotel, he would be dryly clad. Let the police check . . . if it came to that. They would find nothing. *Nothing!*

The water was deeper, now. The shelf would end, just about . . . here. He looked around. He had cut things very close. The tide had already turned. In moments, it would be racing up the sands toward the beach house. He would have to work fast.

Stander bent his body and let go of Margaret's fat white hands so that she would slide from his back. Then he screamed.

The corpse did not move. He tore at the thick-fingered hands. He struggled to shake free. He tried to squeeze out from the flabby cold arms locked tight around his neck.

Stander was still screaming when he fell. The foaming water was up to his waist by then, and he had turned, desperately . . . back toward the beach-house and safety from the swiftly rising tide. But his tortured muscles had not responded. The thing on his back had topped him off balance.

Stander tried to regain his feet. He thrashed wildly in his attempts to stand, and the swiftly running tidewaters invaded his open mouth, poured through his nostrils. Once, he broke water . . . just head and shoulders, with a pair of ghostly white flabby arms clasped tightly around his neck . . . a blue face behind, grinning insanely.

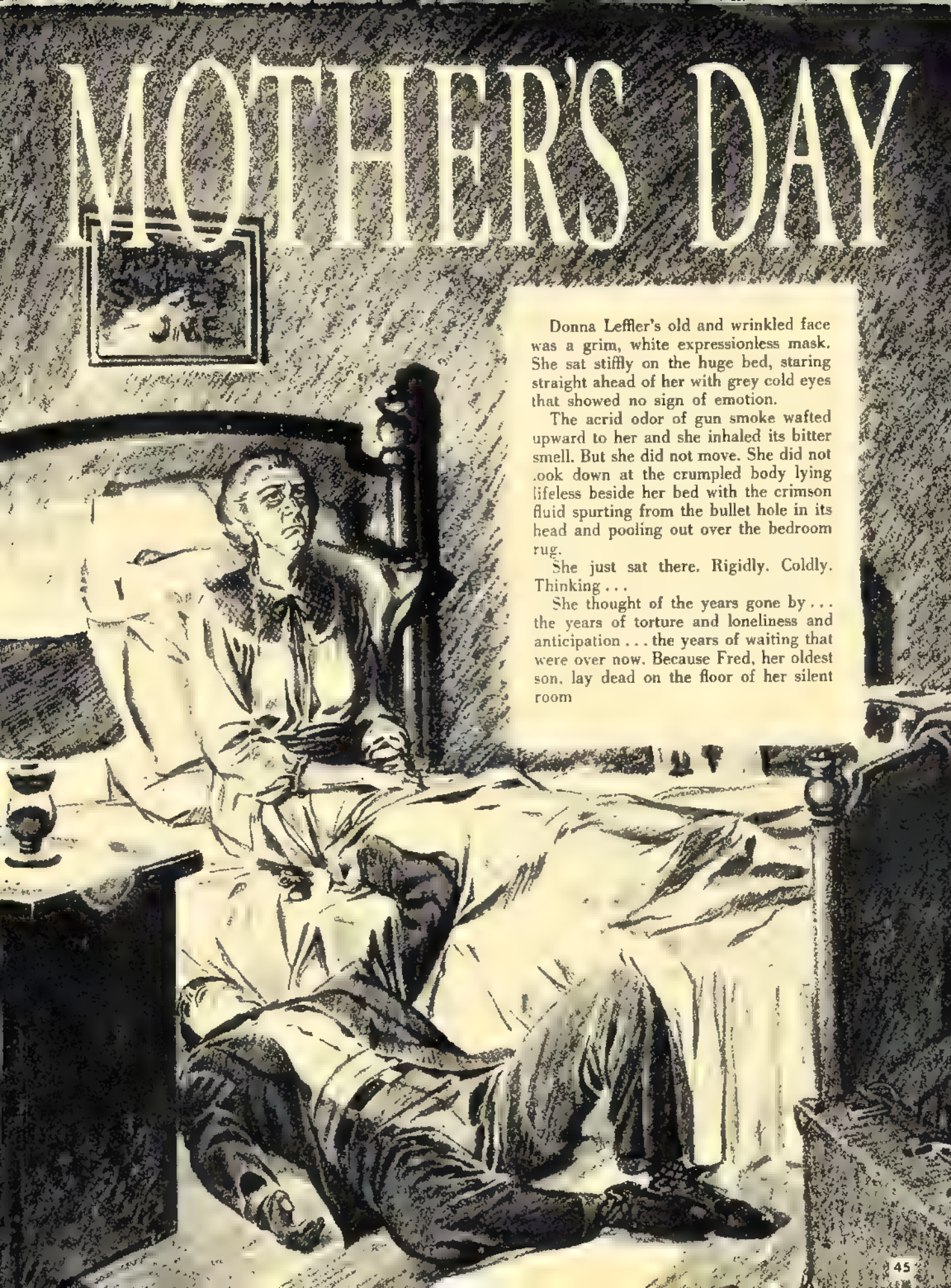
Then, afterwards, there was just the onrushing tide . . . and silence.

Stander had forgotten something.

Rigor mortis.

THE END

# MOTHER'S DAY



Donna Leffler's old and wrinkled face was a grim, white expressionless mask. She sat stiffly on the huge bed, staring straight ahead of her with grey cold eyes that showed no sign of emotion.

The acrid odor of gun smoke wafted upward to her and she inhaled its bitter smell. But she did not move. She did not look down at the crumpled body lying lifeless beside her bed with the crimson fluid spurting from the bullet hole in its head and pooling out over the bedroom rug.

She just sat there. Rigidly. Coldly. Thinking . . .

She thought of the years gone by . . . the years of torture and loneliness and anticipation . . . the years of waiting that were over now. Because Fred, her oldest son, lay dead on the floor of her silent room

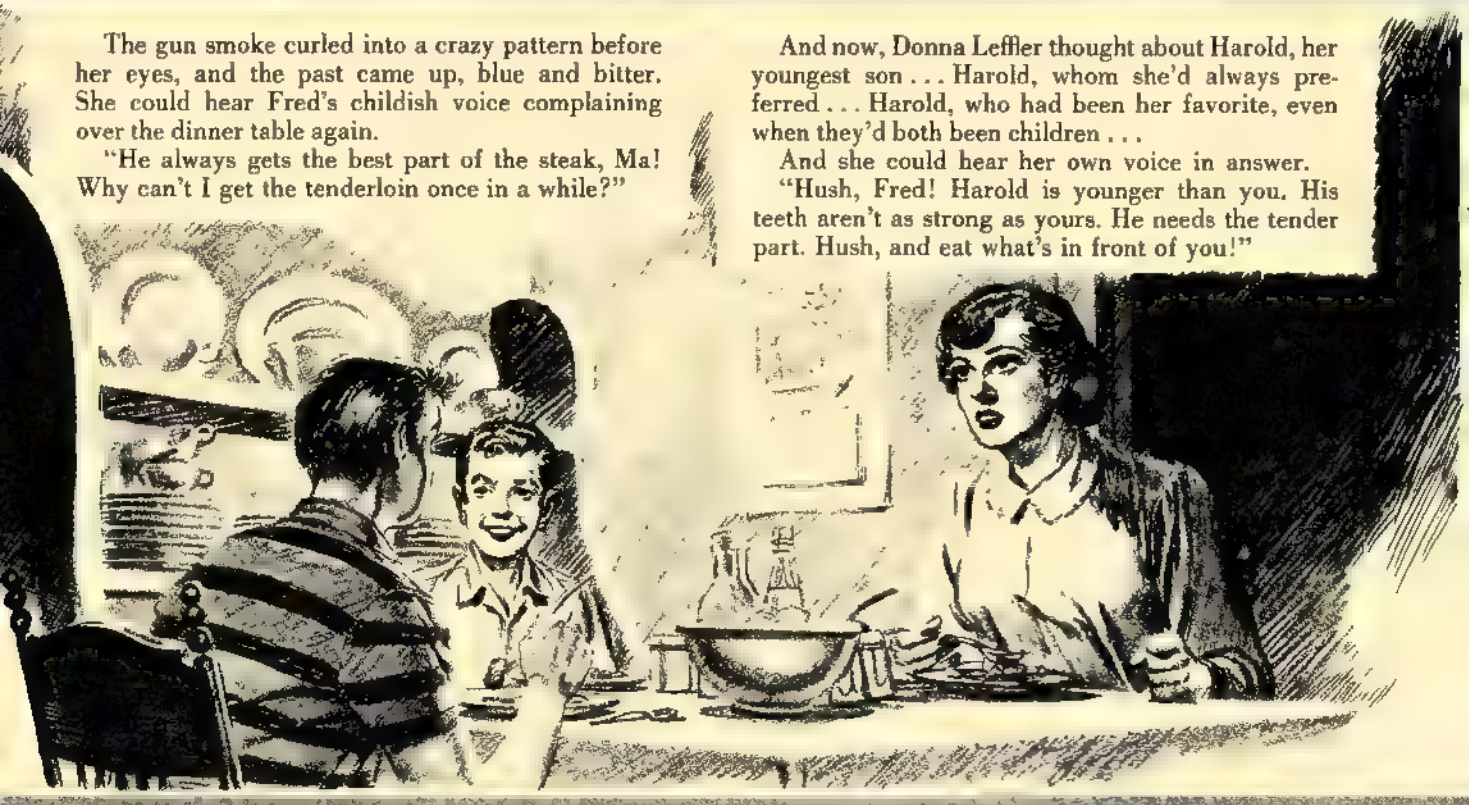
The gun smoke curled into a crazy pattern before her eyes, and the past came up, blue and bitter. She could hear Fred's childish voice complaining over the dinner table again.

"He always gets the best part of the steak, Ma! Why can't I get the tenderloin once in a while?"

And now, Donna Leffler thought about Harold, her youngest son . . . Harold, whom she'd always preferred . . . Harold, who had been her favorite, even when they'd both been children . . .

And she could hear her own voice in answer.

"Hush, Fred! Harold is younger than you. His teeth aren't as strong as yours. He needs the tender part. Hush, and eat what's in front of you!"



Donna'd known . . . right from the beginning . . . that Harold was an exceptional child. He was more sensitive than Fred . . . more precocious. So she'd babied him . . . spoiled him. And Fred had suffered for it.

"But I didn't mess up our room," he would object. "Harold did it!"

"Well, you clean it up anyway! Harold is tired from playing so hard!" She had been unfair.

Perhaps it was because Fred looked so much like his father. Perhaps that was the something that had turned Donna cold toward her oldest son.

"I'm going out for cigarettes, Donna . . ." Mr. Leffler had announced one night during her pregnancy with Harold . . .

. . . And he'd never come back. He'd left her with a young son and another child on the way.

Perhaps Donna'd looked upon her young son's face and seen his father's eyes, his father's mouth, and perhaps that was what had made Donna grow cold toward him. Then, when Harold was born the mirror-image of herself, she'd naturally favored him.

Certainly, she'd been hard on Fred after Harold's coming.

"I said stop making such a racket," she'd scream at him. You'll awaken the baby. If you must stamp and shout, go outside and do it!"

And Fred had gone outside and felt sent away and not wanted.

Donna'd cuddled Harold and cooed over him, and Fred had watched this and felt her growing coldness toward him . . .

And as Harold had grown, Donna's cooing and cuddling had changed to overprotection and favoritism. Harold could do no wrong. Fred was usually to blame.

Donna remembered the time she'd discovered the broken living room lamp.

"I didn't break it, Ma," Fred had cried. "Honest! Harold did it! I wasn't near it!"

"I don't believe it!" she'd said, cruelly. "You're lying!"

But, despite everything, Fred had never stopped loving his mother. Donna'd known this, and yet she could not bring herself to return his displays of affection. She'd actually gotten to the point where she rejected them outright.

"G'night, Mom," he'd say, and purse his lips. "C-can't I kiss you good-night?" he'd plead as she'd back off.

"You were a little sniffly today, Fred. I think you're coming down with a cold." She'd make excuses.

Harold, on the other hand, had never gone hungry for Donna's mother-love. She'd given him all of it. Even Fred's share. And Fred had watched and yearned and said nothing.

"Good-night, Harold dear," she'd hold him close, cradling his softness, "Sleep tight. Mmmmm . . ."

"G'night, Mom," Harold would say, his cheeks wet with her kisses.

And Fred's cheeks would be wet with tears.

Since Donna'd been deserted, she'd had to work to support herself and her two sons. Money was tight. They had barely enough. Yet Harold was always well dressed. Somehow, she'd seen to that. Fred, though, always managed to need things at the wrong times.

"Mom, can't I have a new suit? Harold got a new suit. This one's all wore out!" he'd complain.

"It will have to do for a while, Fred. The house needs repairs and . . ." There was always something.

"The family just can't manage on what I make at my job, boys," Donna'd announced one night when Fred was fifteen. "So, Fred, you'll have to quit school and go to work."

"But, Ma," he'd cried. "I wanted to graduate so I could go to law school."

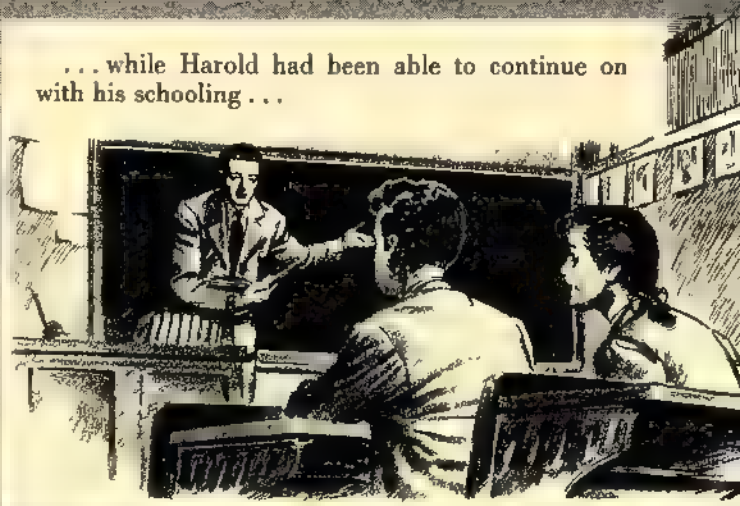
"I'm sorry, Fred. You'll have to give up your plans. We need the money. Perhaps Harold will be able to finish and go to law school . . ."

"Yes, ma'am." Fred had been bitter.

"Do you think so, Ma? Could I?" Harold had bubbled with boyish enthusiasm. "Golly! Me . . . a lawyer!"

So Fred had been forced to leave high school and get a job as a shipping clerk to help support the family . . .

. . . while Harold had been able to continue on with his schooling . . .



Donna remembered the arguments the boys began to have as they grew . . . heated disagreements that nearly always ended up in violence.

"So help me, Hal," Fred would threaten, "I'll beat the living daylights out of you if it keeps up!"

"You'll do no such thing, Fred," Donna would interfere. "You'll leave Harold alone. Come, dear . . ."

She'd interrupted many of those flare-ups in time to protect Harold from Fred's resentment. And, finally, she'd delivered her ultimatum.

"Either you stop picking on Harold or you leave this house! You understand? Leave! For good!"

"Y-yes, Ma!" Fred had promised.

And Harold had smiled in triumph.

Donna thought about the times that Harold would smile sweetly at her and ask . . .

"Can I have some money, Ma? I've got a heavy date tonight!"

And her answer . . . "Of course, dear. Get me my bag."

And she remembered Fred's grim face as he would watch Harold kiss her warmly and leave.

"Don't wait up for me, Ma," Harold would say.

"Come home early, Harold, honey," she'd smile.

But there would be no smile on Fred's face.

She remembered how Fred would pace the floor after that . . . his angry resentment . . . his finally announcing . . .

"I'm going out *too*, Ma."

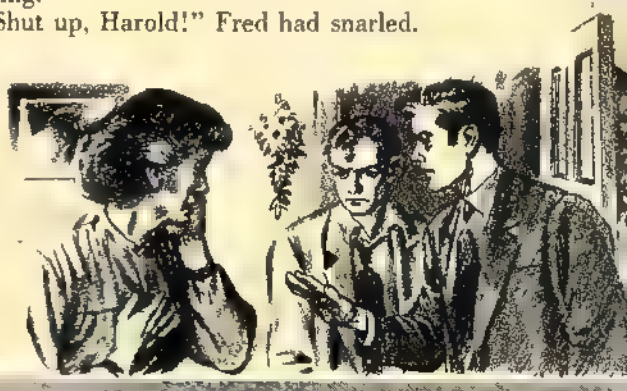
And her cold reply, "I gave Harold all the money I could spare."

And then, Donna remembered that horrible night when the boys had come back dirty and torn and bleeding and gasping for breath.

"You've been fighting," she'd screamed.

"Yeah, Mom," Harold had sulked. "We've been fighting."

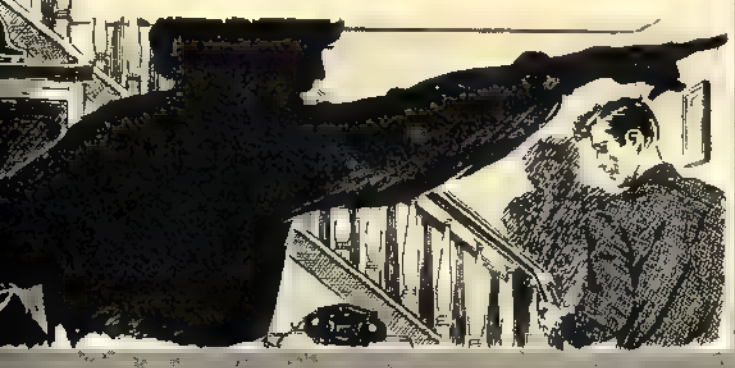
"Shut up, Harold!" Fred had snarled.



And she remembered how she'd turned to Fred.

"Get out," she'd shrieked. "Get out of my house! I don't want to see you again, do you hear? Never!"

"Okay, Mom . . ." Fred had whispered, resignedly.



And she remembered the silence that fell upon the house like a blanket, with only the sound of Fred packing upstairs, until the doorbell shattered that awful silence. She'd gone to the door, opened it, and stepped back, shocked

"A feller live here name 'Leffler'?" The policeman had looked around.

"Why, officer?" she'd asked, almost knowing. "Is there anything wrong?"

"There was a robbery downtown, Ma'am. We're looking for a feller named 'Leffler'."

And she remembered the look that passed between her two boys, and Fred stepping forward.

"It . . . It's me you're looking for, officer. I did it," Fred had confessed.

"Better come along with me, son." The officer had taken his arm.

Now, Donna remembered the trial. It had been so short. Fred sat upon the stand and coldly confessed his crime, and the Judge sentenced him . . .

". . . to five years of hard labor in the State Penetentiary."

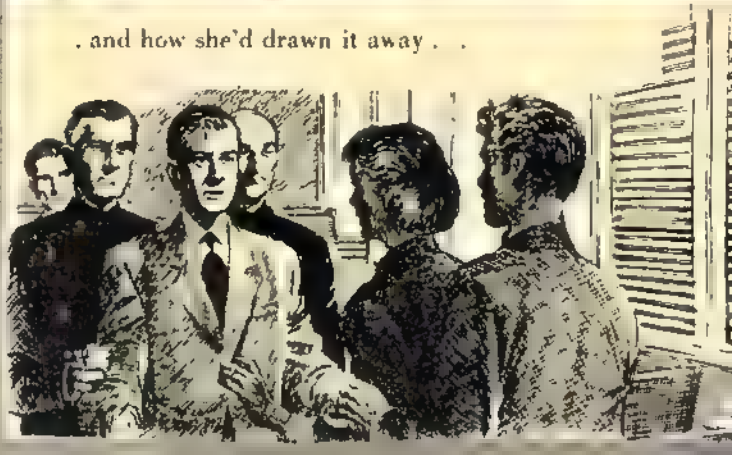
And she remembered how they'd led Fred away . . . how he'd looked at her pleadingly.

"Forgive me, Ma," he'd whispered.

"Thief . . . Crook . . ." she'd snapped.

She remembered how Fred had taken her hand and tried to kiss it .

. and how she'd drawn it away . .



"Ma," he'd sobbed. "Ma . . . I'm your son . . ."

"You're not my son any more," she'd said, coldly. "You're just a bum . . . a worthless bum . . . like your father . . ."

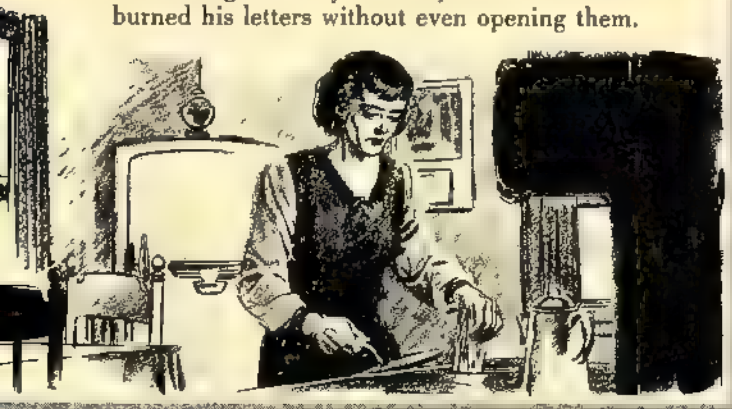
. . . and how she'd spit, and turned.

"Come, Harold . . ."

"Y-yes, Mom. Er . . . G'bye, Fred."

"Take care of her, Harold."

Donna remembered how Fred had written to her after being sent to jail. Every week. And how she'd burned his letters without even opening them.



And now, the acrid smoke from the gun on the floor beside her bed burned her nostrils. And she remembered finding another gun . . . in Harold's desk.

It had happened about eight months after Fred had been sent away.

"Harold," she'd cried, not believing her eyes. "Harold, is . . . is this *yours?*"

"Why, you nosey old b——! Give me that!" He'd sprung at her, like an animal.

He'd snatched the gun from her hand and backed off, his eyes flashing.

"Harold," she'd looked at him, her eyes filling with tears. "What are you doing with a gun?"

"None of your business! What I do is my own affair!" he'd snapped.

"What you do is *my* affair!" Her voice had shook. "You're my son! Do you think I want you to end up like Fred?"

"Fred?" Harold had laughtd. "He was a sucker! He took the rap! I'll play it smart!"

"Nobody plays it smart with a gun, Harold!" She'd reached for it. "Give it to me!"

"Le'go, Ma! I need it!" Harold's voice had been pitched high. Like a spoiled child's.

"Give me that gun, Harold!" she'd insisted, grabbing his wrist.

"Let go of me, Ma," he'd hissed through clenched teeth. "I'm warning you!"

He'd brought his fist down on her arm, breaking her hold . . . painfully . . .

"One rotten thief in the family is enough," she'd turned to the telephone. "If you won't give me that gun, I'll call the police and make them take it away from you!"

"Stay away from that phone, Ma," he'd shouted. "You don't know what you're doing!"

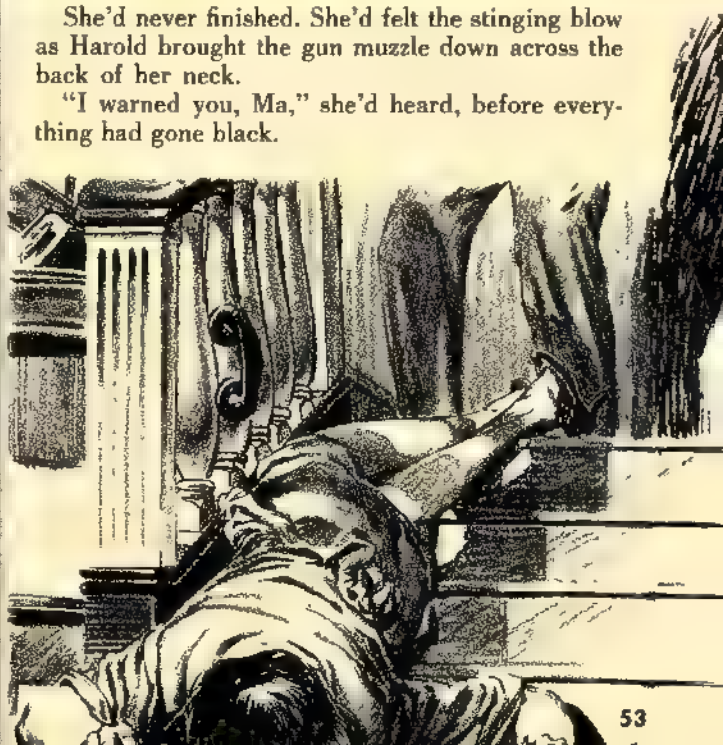
"I know what I'm doing!" She'd lifted the receiver, dialed the operator. "I'm stopping my boy from making a big mistake!"

"Put down that phone, Ma! I'm warning you! Put it down! Ma! So help me, I'll . . ." He'd lifted the gun.

"Hello, Operator? Give me the po- . . ."

She'd never finished. She'd felt the stinging blow as Harold brought the gun muzzle down across the back of her neck.

"I warned you, Ma," she'd heard, before everything had gone black.



Donna remembered how, two years later, she'd read about Harold's death in the papers. He'd been cut down by police bullets . . . the end of a brief career of crime that had begun with robbery and ended with murder.

And she remembered how she'd grown bitter over the years . . . how she'd heard that Fred was being released from prison . . . and how he'd arrived unexpectedly, just a few minutes before.

"Mom," he'd whispered, standing in the doorway. "Mom? It's me! Fred!"

She remembered how he'd stood beside her bed, and poured out his heart.

"He's dead now, Mom. I can tell you now. Tell you everything. He was no good. He used to cut school, hang around with a bad crowd, do bad things. I found him downtown once, when I was working. I warned him."

"But he didn't listen, Ma. That's what we used to argue about. I didn't want him to hurt you. And, he didn't care. He started getting into trouble. He used to go out at night with that gang. I used to follow him. I wanted to protect him. For you."

"I saw him rob that store that night, Mom. I beat the daylights out of him for it. And when the cop came, I took the blame. I knew how much you loved him."

"You always loved him more than you loved me, Ma. But he's dead now. And you know the truth. Say you forgive me now, Ma . . ."

"Ma! Say something to me! Ma! For God's sake."

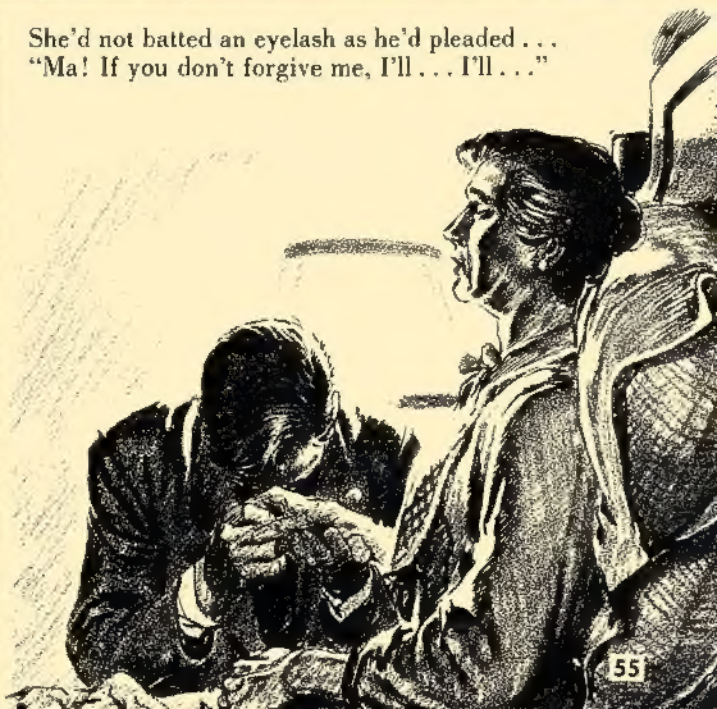
Donna remembered how she'd sat there . . . stiffly . . . like stone . . . her face cold, grim, unemotional. And Fred had pleaded.

"Ma! For God's sake! He was no good! You loved him, yes! But he was no good! Believe me!"

She'd sat there . . . rigid . . . unmoving . . . staring straight ahead of her as he'd fallen on his knees beside her bed.

"He never loved you as I loved you, Ma. I didn't go to jail for *him!* I went for *you!* I knew how you felt about him. I wanted to . . . *sob* . . . spare you . . . *sob* . . ."

She'd not batted an eyelash as he'd pleaded . . . "Ma! If you don't forgive me, I'll . . . I'll . . ."



. . . not stirred as he'd drawn the gun . . .

"I'll kill myself, Ma! If the five years I've given up hasn't won your love, I'll kill myself! So help me . . ."

. . . not even lifted a hand as he'd put the gun to his temple . . .

"Ma! Say something! Ma! Ma-a-a . . ."

. . . and fired.

Yes, Donna Leffler sat stiffly . . . unemotionally . . . on the huge bed . . . staring straight ahead of her . . . not moving . . . not even looking at the crumpled body of her son Fred, lying on the blood-stained floor. She sat there, even though her heart was crying.

She'd sat there for so long. Ever since Harold had hit her across the back of the neck with his gun and *completely paralyzed* her, Donna'd sat that way. Fred had come unexpectedly, while the nurse was out. He'd poured out his heart to her. And Donna'd been unable to kiss him and hold him and stroke his hair and make it all up to him . . . not only those five long years, but his whole life.

THE END

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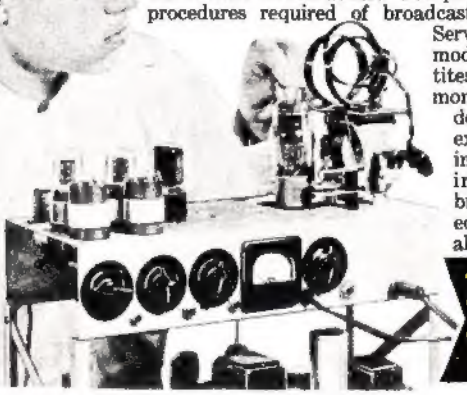

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